

Provocation and Resonance:
Sacramental Spirituality in the Context of Islam

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In this essay, I wish to present and explore two complementary motifs which I believe can be useful in describing the encounter between Christians and Muslims at the level of spiritual experience: respectively, ‘provocation’ and ‘resonance’. The former is descriptive of the dynamic of interaction, the second indicative of the potential for dialogue, between the two. I shall argue that a case for ‘provocation’ as part of Christian-Muslim encounter can be made through revisiting our primary paradigm of relationship with the religious other, that of the Christian-Jewish reality; and I shall then use the example of a Catholic sacramental spirituality in contact with Islam to show what provocation might look like. I shall then make the claim that, despite the apparent aridity of the theme of the sacramental for most Muslims, it is in fact possible to discern dimensions of Islamic experience which resonate with sacramental spirituality. The two parts of my argument are linked in that if, as I suggest, a renewed sense of the importance of the sacramental can be one of the consequences for Christians of the provocation of Islam, then it must be incumbent upon us to ask, to what extent this sense of the sacramental can in turn be seen to resonate with an Islamic spirituality.

Provocation:

From Isaiah to Paul

I take the theme of *provocation* from Louis Massignon, of whom more later; but the word has a depth of meaning in English too. In contemporary usage, ‘provoke’ has a generally negative, somewhat insulting, connotation, ‘invite to anger’. However, it still retains traces of an older, broader meaning: ‘to call forth, summon, invite’. In Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, for example, Miranda’s father Prospero tells her the tale of her early years, when, before they

landed on the enchanted island where she has grown up, they were at the mercy of their enemies. She asks her father:

Wherefore did they not then destroy us?

And he replies:

Well demanded, wench: my tale *provokes* that question.¹

The word here conveys a sense of stimulation into an appropriate response, laced with some measure of being shocked, triggered into an action which might not otherwise have happened. Miranda's question opens a new horizon in Prospero's narrative of self-understanding. 'Provocation' is thus a little different from 'competition', although there are points of similarity. 'Competition' between two communities, or two teams, means being spurred by the example of the other to do the same thing as them, but in a more forceful and effective way. In distinction from this, 'provocation', while likewise triggered by the example of the other, elicits from one's own community that which is a distinctive expression of its identity and values, which might not have been brought forth at all, or not in the same way, but for the catalytic role of the *provocateur*.

Such is the linguistic reference of 'provocation'; but where can we find a theological basis for this idea? I shall argue that the Bible presents us with the starting point for a positive theological sense of provocation, through tracing a trajectory which begins in the Old Testament account of Israel's relationship with God, and then is developed in a significantly new direction with the advent of the New Testament and the issues that raises in relationship to Israel's covenanted relationship with God.

The human encounter with God, charged by the divine jealousy which demands a wholehearted and exclusive commitment, has within it a potential for massive and destructive malfunction when the relationship is violated or ignored by God's people. One of the ways in

1. *The Tempest*, Act I Scene ii.

which the Bible describes this malfunction is through the language of ‘provocation’. One key passage exemplifying this is to be found in Isaiah 65, where God complains as follows about those who will not enter into a dialogue of salvation with him:

I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask,
to be found by those who did not seek me.

I said, ‘Here I am, here I am’,
to a nation that did not call on my name.

I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people [*el-‘am sōrēr*; LXX *pros laon apeithounta kai antilegonta*],
who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices;
a people who provoke [*hā‘ām hammakh ‘isīm*; LXX *ho laos ho paroxunōn*] me to my
face continually.²

It is clear that the prophetic message of Isaiah here is directed solely to the people of Israel. This people, whom God wants to call his own, are indeed ignoring and disobeying him, not following the covenanted way he has set out; but in the setting of Isaiah’s prophecy there is at least no doubt as to who they are. However, in an inter-religious context the prior question of the identity of God’s people is itself raised, and this in turn affects the meaning of ‘provocation’.

We can see this transformation of meaning within the New Testament, in the seminal experience of the ‘parting of the ways’, the earliest and formative phase of Jewish-Christian separation and self-definition. The early Christian community had to confront the existence of more than one group claiming a covenanted relationship with God. They had to wrestle with the reality of a growing separation between Jewish people who did not accept Jesus as Messiah and Gentiles who did recognise in him the decisive encounter of God with humanity.

2. Is 65.1–3.

Michael Barnes has pointed out with great insight how formative for the whole of a Christian theology and praxis of inter faith relations is this question of the Church's relation to the Jewish people as the 'primary other'.³ In parenthesis, we might add that it is interesting to reflect on the question: to what extent is Judaism – rather than Christianity – the 'primary other' for Islam also.

The seminal figure whose thought has indelibly shaped Christian perceptions of what we now call Christian-Jewish relationships is of course St Paul, in particular the Paul of Romans 9–11. In these chapters, the apostle writes in an intensely dialectical way, trying to understand, as a Jewish believer in Jesus, the relationship between two groups both of whom claim a covenant with God: Jews who do not believe in Jesus, and Gentiles who do. Paul's challenge is to reconcile the identity of the newly shaped Christian community with a recognition of the reality of the long called Jewish community, and to do so as a Christian for whom the knowledge of God is in some sense mediated through those who have become for him the religious other, since:

They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen.⁴

From his own deeply conflicted personal position, Paul writes passionately, in language so dense and tortured that it cannot be simply ironed out and fitted into neat theological categories, of the newness of the Christ event, and of the continuing zeal of the Jews for God; of the universality of the Gospel for all people, and of the particularity of the covenant with Israel; above all, of the continuing faithfulness and mercy of God, despite the disobedience of

3. Michael Barnes SJ, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), 31.

4. Rom 9.4–5.

Jews and Gentiles alike. At the end of Romans 11, his writing comes to a climax of unsurpassed paradox which leads directly into an acclamation of the divine glory and wisdom:

Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy through their disobedience [*apeitheia*], so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!

‘For who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counsellor?

Or who has given a gift to him,

to receive a gift in return?’

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever.

Amen.⁵

In reaching this conclusion, Paul seems to have had in his mind the Isaianic message about provocation, which he indeed quotes, but it acquires a new twist in this new situation where there are two parties with whom God seeks to be in relationship. This becomes apparent in the striking way in which Paul actually cites Is 65.1–3, dividing up its verses to refer to different groups:

Then Isaiah is so bold as to say,

‘I have been found by those who did not seek me;

I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.’ [cf. Is 65.1]

5. Rom 11.30-36.

But of Israel he says,

‘All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people

[*apeithounta kai antilegonta*].’ [cf. Is 65.2]⁶

From Paul’s argument, it is clear that he takes the first part of Isaiah’s prophecy to refer to Gentiles, and the second to Jews. It is with the latter that the ‘provocation’ of Is 65.3 would most naturally be associated. However, as Paul develops his theme in Rom 11, the motif of provocation comes to operate not only in the relationship between humans and God, but also between different groups of humans in their respective relationships with God, expressed in the language of ‘making one another jealous (*parazēlōsai*)’:

So I ask, have they [Jews] stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous

[*parazēlōsai*].⁷

The argument, roughly, goes as follows: Jewish unbelief has provoked Gentile faith; that Gentile faith can in turn provoke renewed Jewish belief; and final Jewish belief will signal the salvation of all people. Applying this to his own work, Paul says:

Inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my own ministry in order to make my own people jealous [*ei pōs parazēlōsō*], and thus save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead!⁸

Thus for Paul, through the controlling motif of God’s mercy, the theme of ‘provocation’ is turned around: although God’s provocation still arises in response to negative behaviour, its results become positive, as that provocation becomes a stimulus to another part of God’s

6. Rom 10.20–21.

7. Rom 11.11.

8. Rom 11.13–14.

people to embrace the way of holiness that is opened to them. Paul's thinking, then, has transformed the wholly negative sense of provocation, as found in the context of Old Testament covenant-breaking, into something potentially positive in its results, though it still arises in the first place as a result of the negative behaviour of disobedience. It is important to see that this happens in a situation where Paul has to address the complexities of a plurality of groups claiming to be in relationship with God, so there is an inter-human dynamic which generates his thought. At the same time, he traces the positive outworking of this new dynamic of provocation to the salvific mercy of God; it is a divine purpose, not a purely human interaction, which produces this new possibility. The salvific working of provocation in some sense arises from God; from being a measure of his irritation with his people, it is transformed into a way in which he stimulates them to holiness through their contested relationships with one another.

In Paul's logic, the current provocation to holiness which his own Jewish people offer to Gentile Christians arises from behaviour which he views as negative – disbelief or disobedience. On the other hand, the reverse provocation to holiness which he anticipates will be offered in the future by Gentiles to Jews will stem from the positive response which Gentiles are making to the gospel. In other words, he looks forward to a provocation to holiness which arises from positive behaviour on the part of one of the parties with whom God is in a relationship of salvation. Given this development in the sense of provocation, a further step to explore in the journey of transformations of meaning would be to ask whether a mutually beneficial provocation between religious communities could be something arising from behaviour on the part of either which is viewed in a positive light, although embodying difference. That is to say, in a situation where different groups were claiming to be in some sense in a 'dialogue of salvation' with God, through religious beliefs, histories, values, practices which were quite different from one another, would it be possible to see them as in

some sense provoking one another to greater holiness within that dialogue? Or, to put the question with greater theological accuracy, would it be possible to see God as provoking us to greater holiness through such inter-human contexts of difference and encounter?

If we seek to apply this paradigm from its seminal Christian-Jewish context to Christian-Muslim relationships, it becomes a question both for Christians and for Muslims: can we be positively provoked in the way of holiness by one another? However, it is only the question for Christians which I can appropriately explore as a Christian.⁹ Of course, the potential material to be considered here is vast; I propose merely to look briefly at the example of the historical interaction with Islam of one particular form of Christian spirituality, that of a sacramental spirituality, as shaped in the traditions of French Roman Catholicism.

Provocation:

Sacramental spirituality in encounter with Islam

It was as *provocateurs* to a deeper Christian spirituality that the renowned scholar of Islam, spiritual thinker, intellectual and priest Louis Massignon (1883–1962) encountered Muslims, but he was not alone in that experience. ‘Provocation’ marks out a distinguished and continuing tradition of Catholic spirituality in encounter with Islam, a tradition which emphasises the centrality of the sacrament of the Eucharist, and in which the saintly figure of Charles de Foucauld is seminal. Massignon described himself as ‘provoked to holiness’ by the example of Muslims, both his contemporaries and the saints of earlier generations; in 1948 he said:

Islam has awakened the Christian in me for forty years.¹⁰

Massignon’s approach was foundationally built on his discernment of the authenticity of the God worshipped by Muslims. I want to note three points in his response to Islam.

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9. That said, a Muslim might perhaps point to a Qur’ānic foundation for a positive account of provocation to holiness in *al-Mā’ida* 5.48: ‘If God had so willed, He would have made of you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good; you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about’.
 10. Louis Massignon, ‘Le Signe mariale’ – interview in *Rhythmes du Monde*, 5 (1948–49), 10.

Firstly, there is an intense acknowledgement of the integrity of Islam, and of its spiritual force. Nor is this acknowledgement made in a hostile sense: uniquely, Massignon felt that he had been brought back to Catholic faith through the intercession of Muslim saints. Relying as he does on Islam's descent from the faith of Abraham, Massignon did not share the hesitation of many of his contemporaries over the identity of the God worshipped by Muslims.¹¹ For himself, he declared:

I believe in the same God of Abraham as the Muslims, as Mary in her Magnificat.¹²

The influence of Massignon may perhaps be traced in the following key passage in *Nostra Aetate*:

They [Muslims] adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself [*ad quem fides islamica libenter sese refert*], submitted to God.

However, while the conciliar text does seem to make no distinction between the God adored by Muslims and the Creator of heaven and earth, the Fathers of Vatican II were more cautious than Massignon in affirming the identity of this God with the God of Abraham; at this point, they simply describe the link that is made with the patriarch by the Faith of Islam, rather than themselves affirming the validity of that link.¹³

Secondly, despite, or maybe even because of, the identity which he recognised between the God of Islam and the God of Abraham, Massignon was equally clear about the distinctiveness of Islam and Christianity, even of their opposition. Rather than in identifying predictable 'common ground' in terms of shared or similar doctrines, he was profoundly

11. Cf., for example, the account in David Marshall's essay 'Roman Catholic Approaches to the Qur'an since Vatican II' in this collection of Campion Hall essays of the silence kept by Jacques Jomier OP when asked by Massignon whether the God of the Qur'an is the God of Abraham.

12. In Jacques Keryell, *L'hospitalité sacrée – textes inédits* (Paris: Nouvelle Cité, 1987), 295.

13. *NA* cap. 3.

interested in unexpected points of contact,¹⁴ and so in the ways in which Islam challenged, ‘provoked’, Christianity. One of the key ways in which this was symbolised for him was in the two sons of Abraham, the brothers Isaac and Ishmael. This appears as an allegorical distinction in the Letter to the Galatians, where Paul uses it to signify the opposition of Christianity and Judaism.¹⁵ Massignon, by contrast, in his exegesis links Judaism with Christianity through a common link to Isaac, distinguishing these together from Islam, whose affiliation he traces to Ishmael. His account of this has been aptly summarised as follows:

Islam is the monotheism of those who have been excluded from the privileges awarded to Isaac and so to Israel and the Christian Church, and it calls these two to account for the use made of their privileges.¹⁶

Thirdly, as those words show, Massignon saw Islam primarily as something to which Christianity was accountable, and therefore as something which served the spiritual health of the Church. Describing the aim of the *Badaliya*, the sodality of Christians which he established with an especial concern and prayer for Muslims, he wrote:

Islam exists and continues to subsist because it is of Abrahamic faith, to force the Christians to rediscover a more bare, more primitive, more simple form of sanctification, which Muslims admittedly only attain very rarely, but through our fault because we have not yet shown it to them in us, and this is what they expect from us, from Christ.¹⁷

The spirituality which Massignon developed through his provoking encounter with Islam was in many ways startlingly original, not least in his development of the idea of substitutionary

14. The most striking example in Massignon’s oeuvre of this discovery of an unexpected resonance is the way in which he describes the mystic al-Hallāj as witnessing to ‘the Christic’ through his martyrdom – and making this witness to Christians through Islam.

15. Gal 4.21–31.

16. Anthony O’Mahony, ‘Our Common Fidelity to Abraham is What Divides’: Christianity and Islam in the Life and Thought of Louis Massignon’, 159, in Anthony O’Mahony and Peter Bowe OSB, eds, *Catholics in Interreligious Dialogue: Studies in Monasticism, Theology and Spirituality* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2006).

17. Massignon, ‘Le Signe mariale’, 16.

prayer, and in his readiness to see the links of intercession transcend the boundaries between Christians and Muslims. However, Massignon also found himself provoked in a very specific direction, to return to a given tradition of catholic spirituality. This was a tradition which was emphatically sacramental in its focus. For Massignon, it was shaped by the saintly witness of Charles de Foucauld (1858–1916). Massignon regarded de Foucauld as his ‘older brother’ in the faith and in engagement with Islam, and corresponded with him voluminously. Like Massignon, de Foucauld, who as a young man had lost his faith, in some sense explicitly ascribed his return to Roman Catholicism to his meeting with Muslims. He wrote to Henry de Castries:

Islam turned my life completely upside down [*bouleversement*] – the sight of this faith, of these souls living in the continual presence of God, made me catch a glimpse of something greater and more true, more real, than earthly occupations: *ad maiora nati sumus* [‘we were born for something greater’].¹⁸

De Foucauld here identifies in his meeting with Islam an unavoidable encounter with that which entirely transcends us yet is utterly present to us. Ian Latham points out that this grew into an orientation of his whole life to adoration, a principal theme in de Foucauld’s spirituality, and he relates this acknowledgement of ‘the greater’ as *maius* to the Islamic confession of God as ‘the greater’, *akbar*.¹⁹ However, de Foucauld did not become a Muslim, nor did he turn towards an Islamic understanding of God. On the contrary, the effect of his *bouleversement* was to turn him back to the focus of adoration which his catholic spirituality most immediately provided, namely the presence of Christ in the sacrament of the altar. His first response was to start reading Bossuet’s *Élévations sur les Mystères*, a manual for communicants, and in 1886, as an immediate sequel to his conversion and confession to Abbé

18. Charles de Foucauld, *Lettres à Henry de Castries*, ed. Jacques de Dampierre (Paris: Grasset, 1938), 86. The Latin quotation is from Cicero.

19. Ian Latham LBJ, ‘Charles de Foucauld, Silent Witness for Jesus “in the face of Islam”’, in Peter Bowe and Anthony O’Mahony, ed., *Catholics in Interreligious Dialogue: Studies in Monasticism, Theology and Spirituality* (Leominster, Gracewing, 2006), 49.

Henri Huvelin at St Augustin, Paris, he received the sacrament. Latham tellingly expresses the fruits of de Foucauld's conversion in eucharistic language:

He discovers the living God not in the silent immensity and solitude of the desert, but in the living presence of the man Jesus, who ... feeds him with the living Bread of Life.²⁰

Thus the renewed sense of adoration provoked by Islam was for de Foucauld focused on the sacrament, and a second theme which emerges in his spirituality from encounter with Muslims is also eucharistic in its fullest reference: namely, that of hospitality offered and received. Returning to Algeria in 1902, de Foucauld established a *zawiya*²¹ at Béni Abbès as a place through which he could provide hospitality to those among whom he was living. However, this was not a unidirectional exercise, of giving only on the part of the Christian. The hospitality he offered to his Algerian neighbours was de Foucauld's response to the hospitality which he had received from them, and he sought to point to the Eucharistic Christ as in some way the completion of this exchange of hospitality. Massignon himself wrote of de Foucauld's time at Béni Abbès in these terms:

He came to share the humble life of the most humble, earning his daily bread with them by the "holy work of his hands," before revealing to them, by his silent example, the real spiritual bread of hospitality that these humble people themselves had offered him: the Word of Truth, the bread of angels, in the sacrament of the present moment. Beneath the tissue of empirical facts he would have them divine the transcendent act. Already his contemplation saw the temporal torn aside by the invasion of the eternal.²²

The eucharistic resonances are strong in this passage, as is the language of a French spiritual tradition reaching back to Jean Pierre de Caussade's *L'abandon à la Divine Providence*, with

20. *Ibid.*, 50.

21. A *zawiya* is a lodge or meeting place in Sufi Islam in North Africa, the equivalent of a *khānaqah*.

22. Cited by Christopher Bamford in 'Sacred Hospitality', *MID Bulletin* 73 (October 2004).

its teaching on ‘the sacrament of the present moment’. The spirituality which de Foucauld had been provoked to reappropriate is one which uses sacramental language to speak of the hidden reality of the eternal within the temporal, the infinite within the finite, that of ultimate moment within the everyday. He described the treatise attributed to de Caussade as ‘one of the books that most influences my life’.²³

A third major sacramental theme in de Foucauld’s spirituality, alongside and linked to ‘adoration’ and ‘hospitality’, is that of ‘presence’. Provoked like the other themes by his encounter with Islam, ‘presence’ for de Foucauld was not simply a happening to be in a place, but rather an intentional orientation towards the Muslim other; it followed that the Eucharist itself was for him in some sense a resource and an impulse to mission among Muslims. This did not, however, involve explicit attempts on his part to convert his neighbours in the sense of leading them to Baptism and the profession of the Catholic faith. The understanding of mission which governed de Foucauld’s life, both at Béni Abbès and later at Tamanrasset, was rather expressed as ‘making Jesus present’ through human friendship.²⁴ This friendship could be described as missional not because it was instrumentalised in the cause of proselytism, but because it involved a joining of de Foucauld’s life in union with the Eucharistic Christ whose mission brings to all the loving presence of God:

My work ... is first of all to bring into the midst of them Jesus, Jesus in the Most Holy Sacrament, Jesus coming down every day in the Holy Sacrifice [of the Mass].²⁵

23. Letter to a White Sister, 24th December 1904 – in Philippe Thiriez and Antoine Chatelard, eds, *Correspondances sahariennes*, (Paris: Cerf, 1998), 957. The central principle taught by de Caussade was, that acceptance of God’s will means accepting whatever God presents me with in the present moment. This, it could be argued, is itself a spirituality with strong Islamic resonances.

24. Latham, *op. cit.*, 60.

25. ‘*Mon oeuvre ... est d’abord de mettre au milieu d’eux Jésus, Jésus dans le T-S Sacrement, Jésus descendant chaque jour dans le Saint Sacrifice*’ – Charles de Foucauld, ‘L’Apôtre des Musulmans’, in *Écrits Spirituels*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1928), 254.

De Foucauld's spiritual themes of the completion of the religious impulse to adoration and the humanitarian impulse to hospitality in the eucharistic presence of Christ, and his almost unconscious development of a missiology of presence among and for Muslims, can be traced also in the dramatic story of Massignon's life and spirituality, particularly in the central episode of 'the Stranger', the *Visitation de l'Étranger*, coming in gracious blessing and received in humble hospitality. But whereas de Foucauld's involvement was not with 'Islam' as such but rather with particular Muslims, and whereas he did not engage in an activity which could obviously be described as 'inter religious dialogue', Massignon and those whom he influenced built on the foundations of this spirituality a theology for dialogical engagement with Islam. The influence of Massignon's approach may be traced to some extent in the Second Vatican Council, but it is important also to recognise that like de Foucauld, *Nostra Aetate* speaks primarily about 'Muslims' rather than about 'Islam'. The spirituality and missiology I have been sketching have had an impact among Christians beyond the Roman Catholic Church also, as has the fundamental orientation to Muslims and people of other faiths set out in *Nostra Aetate*. To give just one example, the recent Anglican Communion theological document on inter faith relations *Generous Love* declares that:

Our Christian presence among other religions is honoured by ourselves as we keep faith with our witness in particular places, and it may also be honoured by others through the respect which they can show for that presence. Anglican churches are called to maintain a presence in very different places around the world, to sustain there a sense of sacred place, sacred time and consecrated lives, through which prayer and witness can be generated in local communities.²⁶

26. Anglican Communion Network for Inter Faith Concerns, *Generous Love: The Truth of the Gospel and the Call to Dialogue – An Anglican Theology of Inter Faith Relations* (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 2008), 9.

Generous Love is here articulating a ‘presence missiology’ which can be traced back to de Foucauld’s hermitage at Tamanrasset.²⁷ After that section, which is headed ‘Celebrating the presence of Christ’s body’, the Anglican report goes on to speak about ‘Practising the embassy and hospitality of God’, and explains, with discernible echoes of Massignon’s *Visitation de l’Étranger*, that:

At the heart of our life as a Christian community is a meal for those who know themselves to be strangers and pilgrims upon earth. At the breaking of the bread our Lord himself came to his disciples as one at first unknown. The Eucharist opens us to an awareness that we too are guests of the Father waiting for the completion of his loving purposes for all.²⁸

Here too, it is what can in broad terms be called a sacramental spirituality which is ‘provoked’ by the encounter with Muslims and other people of faith. This is not, of course, the only response of Christian spirituality to that encounter, in any of the Christian traditions, but it does describe a widespread and influential pattern. How fruitful might such a spirituality be in engaging with Islam: how much resonance is there for Muslims in the experience of the sacramental?

Resonances:

Islam and the sacramental

27. This is apparent, for example, in the first stage of evangelisation described in Paul VI’s Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), §21: ‘Take a Christian or a handful of Christians who, in the midst of their own community, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good ... Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one ... Other questions will arise, deeper and more demanding ones, questions evoked by this witness which involves presence, sharing, solidarity (*praesentia, vitae consortio atque coniunctio*), and which is an essential element, and generally the first one, in evangelization’. The document goes on to make clear, though, that this remains insufficient if it is not accompanied by proclamation.

28. *Generous Love*, 14.

It would seem at first sight that the resonances are few and faint indeed. The sacraments in general, the Eucharist in particular, have not been a prominent theme in Christian-Muslim interaction.²⁹ This is in marked contrast to the history of Christian-Jewish relations in Western Europe; in the later Middle Ages, the sacrament became a major theme of contest between Jews and Christians. The former were regularly accused of desecration of the eucharistic host, leading to trials, executions, and sometimes massacres; on the other hand, miraculous hosts were held responsible for the conversion of unbelieving Jews to the Catholic faith. In turn, there developed a polemical literature from the Jewish side dismissing claims of the sacramental presence of Christ:

They believe that he stands always in heaven in a bodily manner, and crucified for no purpose, and his qualities are null and void, and that he descends every day once in all the thousands of thousands of breads and in each of them he is whole. And how very unacceptable this is both to reason and to nature,

wrote Rabbi Yomtov Lippmann (1387–1423).³⁰ As far as I am aware, there is no corresponding profile for the Eucharist in Christian-Muslim controversies.³¹ This difference may in part reflect the non-public nature of the celebration of the sacraments in *dhimmī* communities, as compared to their very public cultus in the context of Christendom.

When they have taken notice of the sacraments, Islamic attitudes have tended to be critical on a number of related scores. The arguments typically major on accusations of: idolatry (worship directed to a piece of bread); cannibalism (with the eating of flesh made still more distasteful through being accompanied by the consumption of alcohol); illogicality (all as in

29. For example, in the remarkable website set up by Christian Troll SJ, ‘Muslims ask, Christians answer’ (<http://www.answers-to-muslims.com>, accessed on 27th December 2011), of the 244 questions submitted by Muslims, only 4 had any relation to the Eucharist.

30. Yomtov Lippmann, *Book of Contention* [*Sefer ha-Nitsahon*] (c. 1400), cited in Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 95. The reference to ‘qualities being null and void’ is presumably a comment on the scholastic formulation of the doctrine of transubstantiation, with its teaching that the accidents of bread and wine persist without inhering in a substance.

31. A partial exception to this is that from time to time anxieties have been expressed from the Christian side over the possibility of desecration of the sacraments in an Islamic context.

Rabbi Yomtov); and social control (the sacraments being seen as instruments for exercising power by the clergy).³² It is interesting to see how much common ground this polemic shares with the anti-sacramentalist strand of some Protestant Christianity. Conversely, any full picture of Islamic attitudes to sacramentality would need to be filled out by reference to some of the more sympathetic approaches which might be found in Sufi traditions, or among the Shi'a, and in the world of 'popular religion'.

In general, however, it is fair to say that sacramentality has not featured as a significant theme in Christian-Muslim interaction. One major Qur'ānic exception to this must be recognised in the final verses of *al-Mā'ida*, 'the Feast', in which the disciples ask of Jesus:

Jesus, son of Mary, can your Lord send down (*yunazzila*) a feast to us from heaven?³³
and Jesus in turn asks of God:

Lord, send down (*anzil*) to us a feast from heaven so that we can have a festival – the first and last of us – and a sign (*āya*) from You.³⁴

Some Muslim commentators elaborated these enigmatic verses into the story of the physical descent from heaven of

A table on which were seven fish and seven loaves. It is also said that it was vinegar, pomegranates and fruits. It had a very strong aroma.³⁵

Within its Qur'ānic context, though, it is important to notice two things about the request for the *mā'ida*. One is, that this is couched in the language of revelation. The verbal root *n-z-l*, 'send down', appearing in both human requests and in God's response to those requests, is

32. The influential Shi'a website, 'Al-Islam', for example, includes a long text by the Muslim convert Thomas McElwain, *Invitation to Islam: A Survival Guide*, which explains (ch. 5): 'From an Islamic point of view, the sacraments function primarily to establish the authority of the Church and its power over the fate of the people. Sacraments are essentially non-Islamic in form, function, meaning, and antecedents.' (<http://www.al-islam.org>, accessed 27th December 2011). From a radical Islamist perspective, Sayyid Qutb wrote of transubstantiation that 'The Church imposed this allegation upon its readers [*sic*] and forbade rational discussion of it' – 'That Hideous Schizophrenia', in Paul J. Griffiths, *Christianity through Non-Christian eyes* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), 73–81.

33. *al-Mā'ida*, 5.112.

34. *Ibid.*, 5.114.

35. Ibn Kathir, cited in Brannon M. Wheeler, *Prophets in the Quran: An Introduction to the Quran and Muslim Exegesis* (London: Continuum, 2002), 309.

one of the two lexical items commonly used in the Qur'ān to signal the communication of God's knowledge, warning and promise to humanity. Moreover, the disciples specifically seek the *mā'ida* as an *āya*, a 'sign' in the sense of a process that both indicates and conveys divine purpose. The other is the strong biblical and liturgical resonances which many have detected at this point. The passage has been seen as referring variously to the gift of the Manna in the Wilderness, the Feeding of the Five Thousand, and the Last Supper. As long ago as 1945, Windrow Sweetman drew attention to correspondences of the Qur'ānic text with the Farewell Discourse of John 14,³⁶ and in a recent rhetorical analysis of Sura 5, Michel Cuypers (who stands in the lineage of Charles de Foucauld as a Little Brother of Jesus) further points out the echoes of the 'bread of life' discourse in John 6.³⁷ Yet the embedded sacramentality of this text, whatever its source, has not been developed in Islamic tradition. There is, then, little historical evidence of the resonance of sacramental language with Islamic attitudes, and so there might appear to be little prospect of sacramentality being useful as a theme for a dialogue of spirituality between Christians and Muslims. However, the discernment of potential resonances should not depend only on what has been actualised in history. It should also be open to the exploration of as yet unrealised, or only partially realised, possibilities in the future. It is important to be clear about what is, and what is not, being suggested here. George Dardess, for example, drawing on his own experience as a Roman Catholic deacon of being present at Islamic worship, suggests that sacramental language can in some way be used to describe the latter. He writes:

36. J. Windrow Sweetman, *Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions* (London: Lutterworth, 1945), Vol. I, 12f.

37. Michel Cuypers LBJ, *The Banquet: A Reading of the Fifth Sura of the Qur'an* (Miami, FL: Convivium, 2009).

As symbols of the communal celebration of the word in both religions, the Qur'ān is more adequately compared with the Eucharist itself than with the Bible. In both the Qur'ān and the Eucharist God shares with us God's self through the word.³⁸

This is perhaps phrased rather unfortunately, since the emphasis on divine transcendence in Islam is such that most Muslims would eschew any language of God sharing his 'self' with others; the divine essence is incommunicable, and it is only the divine attributes which can be known.³⁹ Let us suppose, though, that we recast Dardess' insight in terms of the way in which the community of faith receives, celebrates and responds to the Word of God which its members believe has been communicated to them.⁴⁰ At what level, or in what kind of discourse, would such a 'comparison' of Eucharistic celebration with Qur'ānic recitation operate? Various possible answers suggest themselves.⁴¹

One approach would say that what is being offered are simply observations drawn from the sociology, or phenomenology, of religion. In that case, a comparison of Eucharist and Qur'ān would be just a matter of drawing attention to an interesting set of behavioural parallels between Christians and Muslims, without investing those parallels with any theological significance. In fact, of course, the comparison could not be as straightforwardly factual as this might suggest. Liturgical actions such as Eucharistic celebration or Qur'ānic recitation are already heavily invested with theological interpretation, so any 'comparison' of them inevitably draws us into theological exchange.

38. George Dardess, *Meeting Islam: A Guide for Christians* (New York: Paraclete, 2005), 44.

39. The differentiation of the divine attributes from God's essence, or equivalently from God 'himself' (*nafsī*) was vigorously made by al-Ash'arī (c. 873–941) in opposition to the teaching of the Mu'tazilites; the relationship between the two was classically expressed in the formulation, *lā huwa wa'lā ghayruhu*, 'Not He nor other than He' – cf. Michael Ipgrave, *Trinity and Inter Faith Dialogue: Plenitude and Plurality* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003), 248–252.

40. Similarly, from an Islamic perspective, Tim Winter has spoken about experiencing the Divine Word in the Qur'ān as 'Islam's eucharistic moment, as 'real presence', and 'sacrament' (communication from Catriona Laing).

41. Cf. also the illuminating remarks on Dardess by David Marshall in his essay on 'Roman Catholic approaches to the Qur'ān since Vatican II'.

A second, very different, option, then, would be to judge that the comparison being made was indeed between the same theological reality expressed in two different ways: that is to say, that in both Eucharist and Qur'ān God is indeed truly communicating his Word to the community of faith. Dardess himself seems to incline to this view, though he realises that it leads him into a very paradoxical place; a few lines after the words quoted above, he writes:

How ironic that the Qur'an opens our Christian eyes more fully to what the Qur'an itself denies, that Christ is Lord!⁴²

This highlights one of the problems involved in such a maximally theological approach to comparison: namely, that there are real, and apparently irreducible, differences between the understanding of the divine Word as it is received in Islam and in Christianity. Many would also argue that the language of 'sacrament' cannot be applied to anything outside the life of the Church: sacraments are specific means given by Christ through the new covenant to lead his people to salvation, and to apply the term to other religious rituals is just not possible.⁴³ However, if we are looking for the possibility of a resonance of the sacrament in the experience of Muslims, it seems to me that we are neither restricted to detached anthropological observation nor committed to definitive theological judgement. Rather, we are asking if there is that in Islamic spirituality which can understand in terms of its own experience that devotion to the sacrament which, I have argued, is one of the forms of Christian spirituality provoked by Islam. To look for such an experiential reference point does not imply that the two experiences are substantially of the same theological reality; it

42. Dardess, 44.

43. The distinction is, for example, clearly drawn in the Declaration 'On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ', *Dominus Iesus*, issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2000, which explained (§21): 'Indeed, some prayers and rituals of the other religions may assume a role of preparation for the Gospel, in that they are occasions or pedagogical helps in which the human heart is prompted to be open to the action of God. One cannot attribute to these, however, a divine origin or an *ex opere operato* salvific efficacy, which is proper to the Christian sacraments'. *Dominus Iesus* at this point referenced the *Decree on the Sacraments* of the Council of Trent.

merely tries to open up an area of language in Christian-Muslim discourse where to speak of the sacrament does not appear nonsensical or meaningless.⁴⁴

At the same time, such an exercise is not devoid of theological content. The suggestion that a reference point for sacramental language might be found in the experience of Qur'ānic recitation is of particular interest, since it correlates with a comparison between the doctrinal structures of the two religions which has long been noted.⁴⁵ In Christian faith, it is Jesus who is the revealed Word of God, while in Islam the Word of God is revealed in the Qur'ān.

Doctrinally, therefore, the most appropriate comparisons are those made between Jesus and the Qur'ān, rather than between either Jesus and Muhammad or the Bible and the Qur'ān. If that is the framework of doctrine, a natural question for spirituality is then, whether we can trace correlations also in the community's response to these two 'instantiations',⁴⁶ respectively of Eucharistic celebration and of Qur'ānic recitation.

It is possible to do no more than to suggest some pointers in response to these vast questions, and these will be very personal, as they rely on individual experience of participation in the community of faith. That said, there are three dimensions of the Christian sacramental experience which seem to me to have interesting possibilities of resonance with Islamic experience focused on the Qur'ān; in each case, there is a complex, even paradoxical reality for the worshipper to engage with.

44. Cf., for example, the criticisms of the Eucharist by Yomtov Lippmann quoted above.

45. The comparison was, for example, made influentially, and with provocative succinctness, in R. C. Zaehner, *At Sundry Times: An Essay in the Comparison of Religions* (London: Faber & Faber, 1958), 198: 'For the Word made flesh Muslim theology substitutes the Word made book'.

46. I use the word 'instantiation' here as a generic concept to include theories of both the incarnation of the Word in Jesus and of the 'inlibration' of the Word in the Qur'ān. Karl Rahner, in 'Oneness and Threefoldness of God in Discussion with Islam', *Theological Investigations XVIII: God and Revelation*, tr. Edward Quinn (London, DLT, 1983), 107, spoke of the 'incarnatory character' of all true monotheism, meaning the recognition of God's specific actualisation in the 'concreteness of history'. Adolfo González Montes, in 'The Challenge of Islamic Monotheism: A Christian View', Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann, eds, *Islam: A Challenge for Christianity* (London: SCM, 1994), 69, built on this to write: 'It cannot be said that to accept any idea of incarnation would be completely incompatible with the Islamic concept of revelation, if by incarnation is understood the instantiation [of the Word] within the history of divine revelation'. It seems to me that to apply the language of 'incarnation' to Islam is simply misleading, hence my use (from González Montes) of 'instantiation'.

Firstly, the actualisation of the Word in its primary sense takes place in an event which is a corporate happening: the Eucharist is celebrated, and the Qur'ān is recited, at particular times, in particular places, in the company of particular groups of the faithful. This is a performative reality, and the performance provides an opportunity for the word to be appropriated by those who participate in it. In fact, the primary Eucharistic presence is that of Christ in the body of the Church: as the faithful receive the sacramental body of Christ, they are built up into the ecclesial body of Christ. There is a sense also in which the community which recites the Qur'ān become themselves the bearers of the Qur'ān, in imitation of the Prophet: 'Faithful Muslims [who] so deeply memorise and interiorise the sacred text that it becomes a part of them'.⁴⁷

However, in addition to this performative dynamic there is also a continuing reality of the Word's actualisation which persists beyond the opening and closing of the event, or the gathering and dispersal of the community. In Catholic Christianity, the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament was a practice originally instituted to enable the sharing in communion of those absent from the Eucharistic assembly because of sickness or some other reason, but it subsequently came to provide a focus for venerating the presence of the Christ who remains with his faithful people at all times. In Islam, while the very word Qur'ān points to its primary reality as proclamation,⁴⁸ the pages of the book which is the written or printed scripture are also to be treated with a proper honour as a publication of the Word of God. In both cases, then, there is a persistent presence to be revered as an expression of the objectivity of the Word over against the individual subjects who have participated in its actualisation as communal performance.

47. Michael Ipgrave, *Bearing the Word: Prophecy in Biblical and Qur'ānic Perspective* (London: Church House, 2005), 140, citing the comments of Muslim participants in the Third 'Building Bridges' seminar, held at Georgetown, Washington DC in 2004.

48. *al-'Alaq* 96.1, 'Recite [or read] (*'iqra'*) in the name of your Lord who created ...' is held to be the first verse revealed of the Qur'ān.

Secondly, the believer, Christian or Muslim, approaches and receives the Eucharist or the Qur'ān, respectively, with the assurance that here is undoubtedly the presence of divine reality, in bread or book; and this assurance is built on the fixity of divine attestation, and the specificity of divine institution. Approaching the question of sacramentality as a Muslim, Caner Dagli identifies its key characteristics for Christians as 'consisting of (1) an outward sign (the form), and (2) inward grace, that is (3) instituted by God'.⁴⁹ He goes on to stress that the third point in particular makes this a fitting description of the central practices of Islam, which claim for themselves a divine mandate. For Muslims, the Qur'ān is received and trusted without question as the Word of God because it was as such that it was delivered to the world through the Prophet. Similarly, for Christians, a *sacramentum* is, according to its etymology, a 'pledge' from God, an identifiably promised means of grace in which absolute trust can be placed. The practical implications of this divinely attested reliability is expressed in the principle of *ex opere operato*, that the efficacy of the sacraments depends on 'the work being done', not on the merits of those who administer them; the same principle for Anglicans is enunciated in *Article XXVI*, 'Of the unworthiness of the ministers, which hinders not the effect of the Sacrament'.⁵⁰

However, for both Christians and Muslims, this strength of assurance also poses a temptation: if the sacrament or the Qur'ān, charged with heavenly power, is indeed given into human hands, then there is the danger that either could be manipulated to serve human rather than divine purposes. Both religions have had to contend against magical abuse of this kind, and have done so by complementing the *ex opera operato* principle with reminders of the untrammelled freedom of divine sovereignty.

49. Caner K. Dagli, 'A Muslim Response to Christian Prayer', talk given at the Tenth 'Building Bridges' seminar, held in Qatar in 2011, on <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/resources/networks/the-archbishop-of-canterburys-building-bridges-seminar>, accessed on 27th December 2011.

50. The article asserts a strongly *ex opere operato* view of the sacraments, 'which be effectual because of Christ's institution and promise, although they be ministered by evil men'. Unlike sacraments, 'sacramentals' (*sacramentalia*) do depend on the dispositions of their users (*ex opera operantis*); maybe Muslim practices are more like sacramentals than sacraments.

Finally, the divine reality as experienced by Christians and Muslims is direct. George Dardess rightly remarks that ‘both Qur’ān and Eucharist put us bodily in God’s presence and make an overwhelmingly immediate appeal to us’ – the experience in both cases is one of a direct encounter with the divine. For believers in both faiths, there is a sense in which the veil of created realities is lifted as we feel ourselves to be addressed by the Creator whose Word breaks into our everyday preoccupations.

However, in both Christianity and Islam this divine immediacy is in fact made present by mode of signification. A sacrament is an ‘outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.’⁵¹ Central to Islam are the *āyāt*, both verses of the Qur’ān and wonders of creation, signs which immediately convey the proximity of God – ‘divine indicative and transformative activities [which] demand human engagement’.⁵² Muslims and Christians alike experience a sense of immediacy in their encounter with the Creator, and try to make sense of that within a view of creation which sees it as a semiotic web mediating the divine purpose. That is the challenge which lies at the heart of a sacramental world, and so there must be ‘a salutation of the Qur’ānic view of signs by all who are fed by the bread and wine’.⁵³

51. *BCP Catechism*; cf. St Thomas Aquinas, *S.T.*, III.60: *sacramentum est in genere signi*.

52. Aref Ali Nayed, ‘Ayatology and Rahmatology: Islam and the Environment’, 162, in Michael Ipgrave, ed., *Building a Better Bridge: Muslims, Christians and the Common Good* (Georgetown: GUP, 2008), record of the Fourth ‘Building Bridges’ Seminar, held in Sarajevo in 2004.

53. Kenneth Cragg, *Muhammad and the Christian: A Question of Response* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999).