A CHRISTIAN ENCOUNTER WITH ISLAMIC SPIRITUALITY*

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My aim in this paper is to present the main characteristics of Islamic spirituality and to note points of contact between Islamic and Christian notions of spirituality as well as areas where the spiritual outlooks of the two religions would tend to diverge. In the course of this presentation, I hope that some elements will emerge in which the particular characteristics of Islamic and Christian spirituality might open doors for discussion and growth between Christians and Muslims. I will conclude with brief personal reflections on the encounter between Christian and Muslim spirituality.

A Qur'an-Centered Spirituality

Islamic spirituality is a Qur'an spirituality. Reading, reciting, listening to, studying and reflecting on the Qur'an make up a great part of the devotional life of Muslims. Since Muslims believe the Qur'an to be the literal word, God's own speech, their encounters with the Qur'an are for them meetings with God who reveals, teaches, and forms believers according to His message.

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The centrality of the Qur'an in the spiritual life of Muslims is evident in many ways. Islamic education of children begins by learning to read the Qur'an. Religious training begins not with simple catechisms or summaries of faith, but by coming to know the Arabic text of the Qur'an. This approach might seem surprising given the fact that for over 80% of Muslims, Arabic is a foreign language, one that few of them will ever master during their lifetimes. At the young age at which they begin to memorize portions of the Qur'an, it is not only non-Arabic Muslims who understand little of the text. Because of its archaic language and the Qur'ans allusive, associate style, even more Arab children can understand little of what they are memorizing.

Thus, content, at the earliest stages of the Islamic education, is secondary to the immediate encounter with God's Speech. Understanding is expected to come with time, exposure, and training. For those who practice Islam seriously, there are countless occasions to come to understand the meaning of the message. In the Islamic world, educational programs at mosques, Qur'an study groups, sermons, newspaper columns, magazine articles, and radio and television programs that elaborate Qur'an teaching abound.

The focus on the Qur'an text, even before and beyond its meaning, underlines a basic point of a Qur'an-based spirituality. It is not simply a book to be read, understood and followed. It is God's own message for humankind, the very encounter with which is for believers an act of faith, reverence, and piety, a personal encounter with the God who speaks. When Muslims listen to a recitation of the Qur'an, their ears glorify God; when they recite the Qur'an, their vocal chords express a

speech that is God's own; in memorizing Qur'an verses, the Muslim take God's revelation and makes it a part of this mind, brain, and person.

The first encounter of Muslim children with the Qur'anic text is by memorization, achieved first through oral recitation in common and then through private study. While every Muslim is expected to memorize portions of the Qur'an, the Islamic community grants a special place of honor to those who have memorized the entire Qur'an. Such a person is called *hafiz* (m.) or *hafiza* (f.) It is considered sinful for a *hafiz* to allow this competence to lapse through negligence, and thus the *hafizis* are taking on the lifetime responsibility or trust. A Christian scholar has underlined the importance of memorizing the Qur'an for Muslims by likening it to a Christian's reception of the Eucharist, by which Christ himself physically enters the believer and, as food brings about health, growth, and sustenance, becomes a transforming part of the believer's very self. So also, Muslims believe that their brain and memory are fed and sustained by God's own speech.

Recitation of the Qur'an plays a key role in Islamic spirituality. Communal listening to the Qur'an forms Muslims into a community of those who "hear the Word of God and keep it." In the predominantly Muslim countries, Qur'an recitation can be heard continually on radio and television. Evenings of Qur'an recitation are relaxed but serious occasions of religious socializing. National and International Qur'an recitation competitions are an Islamic equivalent of Eucharistic Congresses among Catholics.

Reciting the Qur'an is a sacred act, demanding careful attention and preparation. It begins, like all Islamic duties, with an act of intention (*niyya*), by which the Muslims consecrate the time and his/her efforts to God's service. The spiritual implications attached to the act of recitation, that the Muslim is not simply reading a book aloud but voicing divine speech, can be seen in Al-Ghazali's ten-step instructions for one who is preparing to recite the Qur'an.

1. **Reflect on the importance** of what you are about to do; Remember God's Kindness in delivering His speech to humankind.

2. **Consider the greatness of the Speaker,** that it is God's own words you will speak;

3. **Enter fully into the world of the Qur'an,** abandoning your own thoughts;

4. **Ponder the words,** do not simply hear them passively.

5. **Try to understand the meaning** [the levels of meaning] contained in the passage;

6. **Get rid of all obstacles** (personal preferences, pride, preconceived ideas) that prevent you from hearing the message in its purity;

7. Be aware that this is **a message first for you,** not simply for others;

8. **Respond emotionally** (e.g., grief, fear, hope, gratitude) to the message.

9. Reach a state where you realize that **the message is from God, not from you;**

10. **Hand over the act completely to God;** get rid if any sense of you own ability. Total abandonment/ surrender.

Recitation of Qur'anic verses is an essential part of the *salat* when Muslims gather for their daily prayer, which means that Muslims who perform *salat* conscientiously will recite (or listen to) the Qur'an at least five times a day. Every Friday, a sermon begins with Qur'anic verses, and the recitation of the Qur'an begins ceremonies such as marriage, circumcision, and burial, as well as the opening of various occasions like meetings, academic congresses, festivals and parliamentary sessions.

Public recitation of the Qur'an is paralleled by the reading of the Qur'an in private, the primary devotional act of Muslims. The Qur'an has been divided into 30 approximately equal parts so that the Muslims can read one section every day in a month. Particularly during the month of Ramadan, many Muslims try to read the entire Qur'an. The sections of the Qur'an are further subdivided into small portions of 3-4 pages for daily reading and reflection.

Islamic Spirituality in the Pillars of Islam

Well-known are the five pillars of Islam: the profession of faith (*shahada)*, the daily prayers *(salat)*, the tithe for the poor (*zakat)*, the fast of Ramadan (*sawm*) and, for those who are able , the pilgrimage (*hajj)* to Mecca. These are basic obligations for every Muslim which, if one were to omit one without sufficient cause, that person would be considered culpable. Since the pillars of Islam are essential to the obedient practice of Islam, it might be worth exploring the implications for spirituality contained in these acts.

The profession of faith in the Oneness of God and the prophethood of Muhammad is that which constitutes a person a member of the Islamic community (*umma*). The first part of the profession, "There is no god but God", expresses the universal dimension of Islam, that which Muslims share with other monotheists, while the second part, "Muhammad is the messenger of God", expresses that which is unique, particular to Islam, and distinguishes Muslims from other religious communities.

The profession of faith, preceded by the personalizing words "I bear witness that ....," is proclaimed from the Minarets five times a day in the *azan*, the call to prayer. It is significant that after every line of the call to prayer, a period of silence is inserted so that Muslims have time to repeat the phrase silently in their hearts. This is done so that Muslims should not remain passive listeners to the call but, by repeating it inwardly, make it their own.

The *shahada* has many functions in Islamic spirituality. When a baby is born the parents immediately whisper the profession of faith into its ears, so that the first human words heard will be those that make the child a Muslim. In Islam there is no rite of initiation comparable to Baptism. A new convert to Islam professes the *shahada* in the presence of witnesses and thereby becomes a Muslim.

As the *shahada* marks the entry of a person into the Islamic community, so is it also the passport to the next world. Dying persons are encouraged to recite the profession of faith so long as they are conscious and, when they are in a coma or unable too speak, the bystanders are to whisper the prayer in their ears. A common Egyptian Prayer for a Happy Death is as follows:

> O God, enlighten my heart with the light of faith at the end of my life when my death throes are upon me, that I may say: 'I bear witness that there is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God.'

Finally, it should be noted that the *shahada* is the most proper form of *dhikr*, repetitive prayer, which Muslims are encouraged to repeat over and over, whether in informal prayer gatherings or as ejaculatory prayer accompanying the ordinary tasks of daily life. Mystically-oriented Muslims hold that the *shahada* is the eternal speech of paradise. As one of the best beloved Turkisk hymns puts it: "The rivers of heaven sing, There is no god but God."

Best known among the pillars of Islam is the daily ritual prayer. This might be called "liturgical" prayer in the sense

that the form and content have been handed down by the community since the time of Muhammed and Muslims are not free to make personal variations. Performing the *salat* is the first prayer taught to Muslim children and it is pre-eminently "the prayer" for Muslims, to the extent that another term *(du'a)* is used for all other forms of prayer.

The *salat* is not a lengthy prayer and can be accomplished in less than ten minutes. The timing of the prayer is significant. The prayer is a reaffirmation of submission to God at the key moments of the day: at dawn, the start of a new day; at high noon, at the moment of intense daily business; mid-afternoon, when the day begins anew in those parts of the world that have an afternoon repose; after sunset, at the close of the daylight hours, in the evening before retiring. As such, *salat* may be compared to the Christian monastic practice of consecrating the day to God by structuring work, rest, study, eating, and recreation within the rhythm of the recitation of the Divine Office.

Before undertaking such a momentous and august activity, Muslims must purify themselves with water. The ritual of physical washing of hands, feet, and face, with special attention to the organs of sense - nose, ears, mouth - symbolizes the inner, spiritual purification that is the proper disposition for prayer. When they have defilled themselves through a ritually impure action, they must perform a full bath before entering into a state of prayer.

Similar to the prayers of Christian liturgy, the *salat* is actually made up of many separate parts, each of which speaks to various elements of Islamic spirituality. Like all devotional

acts in Islam, the *salat* begins with a prayer of intention. This is an entering into a sacred state, a dedication of the act totally to God. After performing the prayer of intention until the conclusion of the prayer, Muslims may look neither right nor left nor depart from the content of the prayer. If one should do so, the act is void and must be performed again.

A characteristic of *salat* is that it is accompanied by fixed bodily postures. These positions distinguish this prayer from mental or vocal prayer in that body, mind, and senses (speech and hearing) are coordinated in the act. "Islam" means the submission of one's life totally to God, and the positions of the body, culminating in full prostration with forehead, hands, and knees touching the ground, symbolically represent this submission. The full prostration, a position that expresses simultaneously surrender, humility and trust (in that position, one is defenseless against any aggeressive action) so perfectly expresses the relationship of the dependent creature before the Almightly Creator, that Muslims are forbidden to prostrate themselves before any living or dead person.

Within the ritual, there are various other forms of prayer. The ritual opens with the phrase: "Glory to God and sing His praise." By proclaiming the glory of God *(subhan'Allah)* in praising Him heavenly chorus of angels who continually proclaim God's glory. Outside the ritual *salat*, glorifying God with the "*subhan*", is a common form of private devotional prayer. Praising God (*al-hamduli'llah*) is made at times of joy, good fortune, and more surprisingly, tragedy. The idea is that all that happens, both good and bad, comes from God and God should be praised in everything.

The heart of the *salat* is the recitation of the *Fatiha*, the opening chapter of the Qur'an followed by an "Amen" and the recitation of several Qur'an verses. The *Fatiha*, sometimes said to be the Islamic equivalent of the "Our Father" of Christians, plays an important role in Islamic spirituality. It combines praise of the God of the universe and acknowledgement of God's tender, motherly compassion (the Qur'anic terms for "compassionate, merciful" derive from the Arabic word for "womb"), with a profession of God's unique worthness to be worshipped and sought for help and a petition to keep Mulims on the Straight Path of an upright life. The *Fatiha* is always followed by "Amen" spoken in a loud voice. It is the great communitarian affirmation that Muslims share with Jews and Christians. Their confidence at the end of the *Fatiha*, may be compared to the Great Amen that marks the communitarian response to the Christian Eucharistic prayer.

Closely connected with the idea of praise is that of thanksgiving. The Qur'anic verse: "Give thanks to the gracious God, if you are His worshipers (16:114)" establishes the place of thanksgiving in the daily prayer. Failing to thank God is an omission for which the Muslim should repent. As a prayer of the Sufi Qadiriyya Order states, "I take refuge with You from my failure to thank You."

The notion of "taking refuge in God" is less familiar to Christians, but it plays an important role in Islamic spirituality. It is an act of throwing oneself upon God's boundless mercy. In the *salat*, as before every recitation of the Qur'an, Muslims take refuge in God from the temptations and distractions of Satan. As in the above mentioned prayer, *a'uzu b'illah* is a prayer of repentance, taking refuge in God's mercy when one

has sinned. On many other occasions of daily life, they will take refuge in God: (e.g., on receiving a compliment, they seek God's mercy that they not be be tempted by pride; on hearing slander or obscenity, they seek god's refuge that they may not give in to illicit enjoyment).

The prayer of silence finds its place in the *salat*. Between each moment of the prayer there is an obligatory pause, a brief time of silence and composure. This is meant to prevent the prayer from becoming a relentless, rote, headlong rush from the start to conclusion. Brief though these moments of silence in the *salat* be, they from an essential part of Islamic spirituality. Prayer is a priviledged moment of contact with the Creator, the Lord of Life, and must never be allowed to become hurried, routine, mindless, heedless of its sacred and august function.

There is no prayer of repentance in the prayer rite itself, but it is recommended that Muslims insert a prayer to seek forgiveness immediately before the greeting of peace. This is usually performed at the morning and evening prayer. The importance of prayer (*tawba*) in Islamic spirituality cannot be underestimated. Absolutely essential for forgiveness of sin and implying a commitment to reorient one's life according to God's will, sincere repentance brings about the immediate and full forgiveness of all sins through God's gracious action. No futher rite of reconciliation is needed, for in fact exists in Islam, except in some Sufi circles.

Before the conclusion of the prayer, there is a moment for personal prayers of petition. Sitting with palms upraised, Muslims express silently their daily needs, hopes, and desires. Thus, while *salat* is mainly a prayer of praise and expression

of submission, the needs of the believers also find a place. Muslims are further encouraged to express their needs in private prayer (*du'a).*

Finally, the prayer concludes with a Greeting of Peace towards the community. Having earlier in the rite greeted the prophet Muhammad, the Muslim at the conclusion of the prayer turns to his in fellow worshippers on the right and left and say "Peace be with you and the mercy of God" (*al-salamu 'alaykum wa-rahmatu'llah*)" and receives the response "And with you peace." This offer of peace is the same as that the community in daily life. In this way, the relationship of believers who come before the Lord together in prayer becomes the norm and model for relations in everyday life.

Every Muslim is required to give a fixed percentage of income for the poor of the community. It differs from almsgiving (*sadaga*), which is highly encouraged, in that the *zakat* is obligatory and fixed according to precise rules and calculations. One of the manifestations of Islamic revival is the emergence of "Zakat lawyers" in Muslims to determine the proper amount they are to pay in tithe. In several countries, such as Pakistan, the tithe is collected from Muslims by the State and used to finance charitable works for the poor.

This practice is opposed by other Muslims (e.g., the Muslim Brotherhood), who see the collection and distribution of the *zakat* as something outside the competence of the State. The tithe should be a personal offering, they hold, given by the Muslims directly to those in need. Their point is that each Muslim must realize that the poor of the community are his or her responsibility, a spiritual obligation which cannot be simply written off on tax forms.

In fact, the manner of collecting and distributing *zakat* varies widely in the Islamic world. It is a common sight in Cairo and Damascus, especially during the month of Ramadan, to see a bread truck pull up at a mosque in a poor neighborhood, and loaves of Arabic bread distributed to the needy. In Indonesian and Malaysian villages, *zakat* is paid in rice. A woman preparing the staple food for her family sets aside every tenth handful. The uncooked rice is collected on Thursday afternoon, brought to the mosque, and deposited in a large wooden bin. This is available, with no questions asked, to those who need it. Elsehwere, well-to-do families conscientiously prepare extra food at home at midday on Fridays so that they can feed the needy after Friday prayers.

We have already intimated the spiritual implications of the *zakat.* Caring for the poor of the community is not a matter of choice, mood, or feelings of sympathy. It is a required duty for every obedient Muslim, one that may not be ignored without incurring God's anger. Any relationship to God or life of prayer, fasting and other acts of worship that does not include the element of concrete assistance to the poor of the community is not a fully Islamic response to the Qur'nic message. This teaching is repeated over and over in mosques, newspaper articles and study groups throughout the Muslim world especially during Ramadan, and marks responsibilty to the poor as one of the pillars of Islamic spirituality.

The key elements for Islamic spirituality in the Ramadan fast are remembrance, celebration, communal soldarity, spiritual renewal, forgiveness, and exposure to the experience of hunger.

Ramadan is a time of grateful remembrance in that Muslims believe that the Qur'an was first revealed during this month. In addition to the special prayers thanking God for the gracious revelation of His message to humankind, Ramadan is a time for Qur'an study groups to be organized among various sectors of society, such as students, housewives, civil servants, and factory workers, for lectures on the Qur'an, and for academic congresses and public Qur'an recitations. During the last week of Ramadan, on the night of Destiny when the Qur'an is believed to have been sent down from heaven, and when the day of Judgement is popularly expected to arrive, Muslims are encouraged to spend the entire night in the mosque, reading Qur'an, listening to its recitation, and performing recommended prayers. It is during this week that the eschatological element of Islamic spirituality, so strong in the early *suras* of the Qur'an but usually muted in modern Islam, comes to the fore. With the expectation that the last Judgement might arrive on the Night of Destiny, they hope to be found in prayer when the time comes.

A second element is celebration and solidarity. Far from being a sad or gloomy time in the Muslim calendar. Ramadan is the happiest month, eagerly awaited by Muslims. The ordinary rhythm of daily life is disrupted and, in fact, completely replaced by a "sacred" schedule, with families rising in early hours of the day, as early as 2:30-3:00 in the morning, to prepare a light meal to be consumed before dawn. The work day is frequently shortened and in some places school children are released in annual vacation. The mosques are more crowded than usual with worshippers, not only for *salat*, but with visitors and private worshippers attending lectures on Qur'an and recitations of the Sacred Book. At the popular level, many

Muslims visit shrines and tombs of holy persons during Ramadan, and Sufis hold sessions of *dhikir* in the mosques. As sunset approaches, an air of anticipation is in the air, food being prepared but not yet consumed, and much movement in the streets, with workers rushing to reach home before sunset and families invited out to break the fast hurrying to arrive home. Sunset is announced by the call to prayer from the minarets, and in many places by cannons, gunshots or fireworks. While the more pious perform the sunset prayer before eating, the masses break their fast immediately, in the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate, with traditional and recommended fare - plain water, olives, fruits. The *iftar*, or breaking of the Fast, is one of the most loved and enjoyed social functions in Islam families. Neighbors, friends and collegues gather at one another's home or, in modern cities, at restaurants, to break the fast, with the result that the Ramadan is a period of intense socializing. After the meal, many return to the mosque for night prayer and the long *tarawih* prayers that are particular to Ramadan. At the conclusion of the *tarawih*, usually about 10:00 p.m., shops and markets are again open, social calls are made, and a special musical program is aired on television. The socializing goes on until the early hours.

The significance of all this for Islamic spirituality cannot be underestimated. The communal performance of a long and difficult fast, with many periods of prayer together followed by communal celebration, creates a strong sense of social solidarity. Disrupting the normal daily schedule and performing ordinary activities - rising, eating, praying, shopping - at extraordinary hours results in the creation of sacred time. Business affairs and work schedules are kept to a minimum so that the main "business" of Ramadan is the celebration of all

that it means to be Muslim. I have occasionally asked Muslim converts to Christianity if they ever feel any nostalgia for anything after leaving the Islamic community. Consistently they answer, "Ramadan". To them, modern Lenten practice seems bland and perfunctory by comparison.

Important aspects of the Ramadan fast are spiritual renewal and forgiveness. Like all the religious believers. Muslims tend to get slack in their perfomance of religious obligations. Perhaps in the matter of skipping prayers, perhaps in harsh treatment of their wives and neglect of the children, or in gossiping, tale bearing, or dubious commercial practices. Muslims fail to live up to the ritual and ethical standards set by their faith. Ramadan is a time for repentance and starting anew. a characteristic it shares with Christian Lent. The evening *tarawih* prayers are especially directed towards asking forgiveness for the wrong doings committed the previous year. Muslims believe that God's mercy is boundless and immediate towards one who repents, but during Ramadan God's forgiving grace is superabundant. The Muslim believes that through the faithful practice of Ramadan, all his or her sins are forgiven.

This accounts for the joy with which the Id-al-Fitr, the Feast of Breaking the Fast, is celebrated. Although not the first day of the Islamic calendar, the *Id-al-Fitr* is the spiritual New Year of Islam, the new beginning and starting over. Having been forgiven their sins by God, Muslims are taught to forgive one another, thus bringing together the vertical and horizontal dimensions of forgiveness. Muslims visit parents, relatives, friends and co-workers during the feast to beg forgivenss for any wrongs they have committed towards the others during the year. In Southeast Asia, this universal practice is called *halal-bi-halal*, which might be translated "setting things aright." The spiritual purpose is to prevent grievances, resentments, and estrangements from persisting from year to year, thereby poisoning human relations.

Finally, an aspect of the Ramadan fast often raised in sermons and articles in the Islamic press is the experience of hunger. Muslims who suffer from hunger pangs during the daylight hours are taught to recall the fate of millions of persons in this world who lack sufficient food. Their is not a voluntary hunger, like that of fasting Muslims, but a condition enforced by circumstances. Ramadan has thus become, especially in recent decades, an experience of conscientization towards the plight of starving peoples. Whether through free-will offerings to the local poor or by influencing government policies, Muslims are urged to address concretely the problems of hunger and starvation.

The opportunity to make the pilgrimage to Mecca some time during one's life is a longing of every pious Muslim, but in fact, due to factors of health, responsibilities (e.g., raising children), expense, and simple logistics, most Muslims are never able to fulfill this desire. Because of the ease and speed of travel and economic capability of many Muslims, the annual applications to make the pilgrimage today exceed those of any previous era, far beyond what can be accomodated by extensive but still limited facilities in Arabia. The norm laid down by the Saudi authorities is one pilgrim for every 1000 Muslims of each nation. Indonesia, with the world's largest Muslim population, this year received 180,000 visas for the *hajj*, and the numbers decrease from there.

Even tough for most Muslims the *hajj* remains a dream that will never be fulfilled, the pilgrimage still plays an important role in Islamic spirituality. Like other pillars of Islam, the form and content of the pilgrimage is fixed. The pilgrimage must be made at the proper time and prescribed actions must be performed on the proper days.

The pilgrimage is a reliving of the spiritual roots of their faith. Mecca is not only the scene of Muhammad's birth and early prophetic mission but, as the site of the *Ka'ba*, the direction towards which all Muslims pray daily. For Muslims, this symbolizes both the unity of the Islamic *umma* and also the ancient, God-given nature of Islam. Muslims believe that the Ka'ba was built by the prophet Abraham, the first structure on earth dedicated to the worship of the One God. The daily act of praying in the direction of one location is a constant reminder that Muslims form one community. On the wall of even the simplest mosque, in homes and hotel rooms, there is an indication of the direction of Mecca.

Upon arriving in Mecca for the pilgrimage, Muslims enter a sacred state, a time dedicated totally to God. Normal clothing is replaced by two white sheets. It is forbidden to cut the hair or nails. Sexual abstinence is required until the conclusion of the pilgrimage. The preliminary rites of the pilgrimage revolve about Mecca, particularly the circumambulation of the Ka'ba, as Muhammad and his early companions had done, and commemorative reenactment of events from the life of Abraham, Hagar, and the baby Isma'il.

The central and indispensable act of the pilgrimage, however, takes place some 30 km. outside Mecca on the slopes

of Mt. Arafat. The Day of Arafat is the pilgrimage **per se**. If it is omitted, one has not performed the pilgrimage and the obligation to do so remains. Muslims ascend the mountain from their tent city at Muzdalifa in time for noon prayers and remain there until after the sunset prayer. During the time on Arafat, Muslims might pray informally, read or recite the Qur'an or rest.

To understand the deep spiritual implications of a rite that might seem anticlimatic, on must recall the geography of the place. Arafat, in the midst of the Arabian desert, is one of the world's most arid, hot, and inhospitable locations, and has been since the time of Muhammad. There is no earthly reason why anyone would go there. The only conceivable motivation is spiritual; God has commanded it. Obedient to God's command, "even to the end of the earth", the Muslim professes the belief that the human person finds true fulfillment and identity in obedience to God. Standing in the blazing sun under the hot blue sky of Arafat, the pilgrims, by their very presence, affirm that the ultimate purpose and reason for human existence is found in the free and joyful acceptance of one's creaturehood before God and in living accordingly. One might say that a whole lifetime of Islamic experience, as incarnated in the individual Muslim, is symbolically represented in this one act.

Upon the return from Arafat, a further moment of the pilgrimage remains to be noted. Halfway back to Mecca, in the village of Mina, Muslims sacrifice a goat or sheep to commemorate the faith of Abraham who was prepared in obedience to sacrifice his own son Isma'il. At this point, the pilgrims become united with the Islamic feast, Id al- Adha, the Feast of the Sacrifice. Just as the Day of Arafat sums up in

one act the Islamic understanding of the meaning and purpose of human life, so the Sacrifice expresses their continuity with the faith of Abraham. It is a moment at which Muslims around the world can vicariously participate in the pilgrimage, performing at their own homes or mosques the same rite performed in Mina.

Islamic Spirituality as Imitation of Muhammed

The pillars of Islam, as important as they are, express the obligatory minimum of the Islamic ways of life. Each obligatory pillar is complemented by recommended actions whose performance is considred praiseworthy and meritorious, but whose omission is not considered sinful. The profession of faith (*shahada*) in the Oneness of God and the prophethood of Mohammed is amplified in the *agidah*, the creed, which centers on the pillars of Islamic faith: belief in God, His prophets, the Sacred Books, the Angels, and the Day of the Final Judgement.

In addition to the obligatory *salat* five times a day, there are recommended times of *salat*, such as during the night and on special occasions, a supererogatory series of prostrations which may be added on to those required, and a vast array of informal prayers, *du'a,* which are encouraged but not required. In addition to prescibed *zakat,* Muslims are urged to give alms (*sadaga*) spontaneously to the poor. To the fast of Ramadan, many pious Muslims add other recommended fasts, e.g., on Mondays and Thursdays, or extend the Ramadan fast by beginning two months early; making it a 90-day fast. In addition to the *hajj*, Muslims perform the *umra*, an informal

pilgrimage to Mecca outside the season of the *hajj*. Today, almost 200,000 Muslims every month arrive in Mecca to perform the *umra*. The broad recommended actions, that include not only ritual acts such a prayer, but instructions on mundane things like receiving guests, eating, traveling, carrying on business, family relations, even the performance of bodily functions, comprise the *sunna*. It is *sunna*, for example to eat everything on one's plate. It is *sunna* to offer cologne to guests. It is *sunna* to say at the conclusion of a journey, "Praise God for a safe arrival (*al-hamdu li'llah 'ala salama*)", a phrase regularly heard today among airline passengers when the plane lands safely.

The *sunna* is derived from the practice of Muhammad and found in the collections of *hadith* reports of his sayings, deeds, and decisions. As such, an important aspect of Islamic spirituality is the imitation of Muhammad. Muhammad is understood in the Qur'an not only as the Messenger who brought the Qur'an, but also as its first hearer. He is seen as the model Muslim whose life was shaped to the smallest detail by the Qur'an message. He is the friend and mentor of Muslims who will intercede for them on Judgement Day. The role that Muhammad plays for the Islamic community today is well summed up in the recommeded prayers at his tomb in Madina. The Sunni prayer reads:

> I bear witness that you are Messenger of God. You have conveyed the message. You have fulfilled the trust. You have counseled the community, enlightened the gloom, shed glory on darkness, and uttered words of wisdom.

The prayer of Shi'a is even more invocative:

> I bear witness that you have conveyed the Lord's messages and declared His command. You have borne hardship in His cause and summoned people with wisdom and proper exhortation to His way. You have carried out that which was entrusted to you. You have worshipped with a single-heartedness that brought you total certitude. To me you are as (as beloved as) father, mother, my own self, property, as my own child.

The place of Muhammad in the hearts of Muslims thus goes far beyond that of being simply the messenger who brought the Qur'an. He is also the exemplary model of living and regarded with the same affection as that felt towards a family member. On this basis, one can understand the anger and sense of personal insult with which Muslims react to any slander or slur on the character of Muhammad.

Information about the life and deeds of Muhammad is found in the early biographies, but much more in the collections of *hadith* reports that are traced from him. There are over 100,000 *hadiths*, but only about 2000 soundly authenticated reports form the basis of Islamic faith and practice. Many of the most characteristic elements of Islamic spirituality, from the form of the daily prayer to the rites of the pilgrimage, are found not explicitly in the Qur'an but are recorded, rather, in the *hadith*. The case of the pilgrimage exemplifies the function of the *hadith*. When nearing the end of his life, after his victory over the pagans of Mecca, Muhammad made the pilgrimage from Medina to Mecca. Every detail was meticulously recorded

and handed down, so that, until today, *hajjis* are imitating in detail the example of Muhammad's own peformance of the pilgrimage.

Muhammad is not only a model of behavior, but a much loved exemplar. The deep affectionate love that Christians have towards Jesus expressed, for example, in Sacred Heart devotions, or towards Mary and the saints, finds its parallel in the human affection that Muslims feel towards Muhammad. One writer on Islamic spirituality has put it like this:

> No one can estimate the power of Islam as a religion who does not take into account the love at the heart of it for this figure [Muhammad]. It is here that human emotion, repressed at some points by the austerity of the doctrine of God as developed in theology, has its full outlet - a warm human emotion which the peasant can share with the mystic. The love of this figure is perhaps the strongest binding force in a religion which has so marked a binding power. *

The Qur'an and *sunna* together form the principal bases of the *shari'a*, the Islamic way of life. Containing elements of law but going far beyond the notion of law, the *shari'a* indicates the totality of actions and attitudes that characterize Islamic life and society and distinguish them from that of others. The *shari'a*, elaborated over the course of centuries by a subtle art of jurisprudence, covers every aspect of human life, from family relations, to the social, economic, and political organization of

*M. Smith, *Muslim Devotions*, 1961, p. 145.

the community. According to the principles of Islamic jurisprudence, every conceivable human act falls into one of five categories: obligatory, recommended, indifferent, reprehensible, or forbidden.

The community itself has a role in the determination of the *shari'a*; when there is consensus of the community regarding an action or element of faith that it to be considered Islamic. Much stressed in recent decades is the personal contribution *(ijtihad)* of the individual Muslim, who has a responsibility to apply the *shari'a* according to the needs of every culture and place and at every period in history. One cannot understand Islamic spirituality if one does not recognize that Muslims, far from being embarassed by having a religion of law, are convinced that the comprehensive *shari'a* is one of God's greatest gifts to them. It is an approach to religious life that has more in common with the Jewish attitude towards the Torah and its elaboration in the *halaka* than one that finds any immediate parallel with the Christian tradition.

Spiritual Paths in Islam: Sufism

Observers of Islam have at times identified Islamic spirituality with the phenomemnon of Sufism, and some observers have gone so far as to set up a dichotomy between the "spiritual, interiorized" Islam of the Sufis and a dry, legalistic formalism that is said to characterize "official Islam." I hope that all that has preceded has shown the inaccurancy of this judgement. If normative symbols, and emotions, an immediate response of the human person to the Divine in our midst, the message of Islam would appeal to few and its hold on believers would remain superficial and ephemeral.

On the other hand, the Sufis were not out to set up a parallel Islam in opposition to the *shari'a*. They wanted to mine the riches of spirituality already found in Islamic practices and to draw out the implications for personal growth in holiness. As one writer puts it:

> One should not forget that the *shari'a*, as proclaimed in the Koran and exemplified by the prophet, together with a firm belief in the Day of Judgement, was the soil out of which their [the Sufis'] piety grew. They did not abolish the rites but rather interiorized them. The performance of ritual prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage to Mecca constituted, for the majority of the early Sufis, the minimal religious obligation without which all possible mystical training would be useless and meaningless. *

From the earliest centuries, there were some Muslims who stressed the potential of the Qur'anic message to effect an inner transformation of the believer. In one sense, their's were voices of protest against the wordly power and wealth that entered the community in the first generation after the death of Muhammad. They stressed the need for a simple, prayer-centered life and even adopted many harsh ascetical practices of the Christian monks ot the desert. Basing their teaching on Qur'anic passages, they stressed the transforming power of God's love in human hearts and understood Islam as a path to attain union of love and will with God.

*A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 1975, p. 106.

Spiritual teachers began to attract disciples, and some began to write down instructions for their students and posterity. Chains of initiation began to develop, so that a student on the Path identified, through his spiritual teacher and his teacher's teacher, with one of the great spiritual masters of the past. Already by the second century of Islam, these people came to be called Sufis, although scholars still dispute the origins of the term.

By the 13th century, most Sufis were inscribed as members of one or another Order or Brotherhood (*tariga*), each stressing its own forms of prayer and patterns of spiritual exercises, as well as having its own distinctive dress codes, and methods of initiation. The Brotherhood, which have many elements in common with Christian lay confraternities and religious orders, often attracted a specific clientele, one drawing mainly from the cultured intelligentsia, another from the members of a specific craft guild, still others from soldiers or from the urban or rural masses. Some orders were very international and missionary-minded, others identified with certain localities and ethnic groups.

The Sufis saw Islam as a path leading progressively to union of love and will. Through a prescribed set of spiritual exercises, under the guidance of a spiritual director, the spiritual seeker passed through a series of stations (*magamat*) in which he or she strove hard to overcome the human obstacles to the action of God's grace. The Sufi would have to learn humility, obedience, poverty, patience, diligence, temperance in matters of food and sex, etc. At some point, he or she (there have been many women Sufis) would be blessed with special states (*hal*, pl. *ahwal*) when God would enlighten the seeker's heart

with strong experiences of love, trust, joy and fear of the Lord, etc., when God would intervene directly by grace to carry the believer further along the Path. These states were not always uplifting. The Sufis knew the Dark Nights described by the Chrsitian mystics of the Carmelite tradition, when they had trust in God despite the lack of sensible or emotional evidence.

The final state before reaching the Goal was that of *fana'* when everything wordly would pass away and all that would remain (*baga*) was God's loving presence. The Sufi had arrived at the Truth, the ultimate goal of human life with God where the believer no longer had an independent will of his own, but desired nothing but the will of God. Students of Christian spirituality will find surprising parallels between the stages of the Sufi path and the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways described by Christian writers.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of Sufi spirituality is their development of the Qur'anic injunction to "Remember God often" (33:40). The word *dhikr* means "remembrance" and refers to a wide variety of short, repeated prayers whose purpose is to center one's concentration on the immediate presence of God. This is similar to the *theomnemie* of the Christian Byzantine tradition and Russian "Jesus prayer." According to the particular tradition at any time or be recited aloud in common, often accompanied by bodily movements, musical chanting and instruments. As mentioned above, the most widespread prayer formula of the *dihkr* is the *shahada*.

A popular form of *dihkr* practiced by both Sufis and non-Sufis is the rosary (*tasbih*), with which the Muslim recites on each bead the Beautiful Names of God. Ninety-nine of these names are mentioned in the Qur'an, hence Muslim rosary

beads usally have 99 or 33 beads. As each name corresponds to one of God's qualities, the Muslim prayer becomes an extended meditative reflection on the nature and characteristics of God.

Some mystical traditions tended towards a type of pantheism, where God was seen as the only true reality, and the transient beings of this universe were no more than epiphanies or shadows of the One Reality. Their view may be expressed as an interpretation of the *shahada*: "There is no reality but God." This view was not accepted by other Muslims, who felt that it made God wholly immanent and destroyed God's essential differentness and transcendence. The resulting controversy marked many periods of the "middle centuries" of Islamic history.

In the 20th century, the influence of Sufism in the Islamic community has declined greatly, partly due to the criticism of reformers who felt that the preoccupation with personal perfection was a deviation from the original spirit of Islam, partly due to modernizing and secularizing forces within the Islamic community itself. However, there are still many parts of the Islamic world in which Sufism is very much alive and active. West Africa, the Maghrib, Egypt, Sudan, and South Asia are outstanding examples. In Central Asia, the Sufi orders formed the backbone of resistance to communism, the one societal structure that the Soviet regime was unable to infiltrate and control. A resurgent interest in Sufism can be seen in the modern Muslim publications in Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, and Indonesia. The Sufi expression of Islamic spirituality, while at the moment in eclipse in the Islamic world, must not be discounted as an element of the spiritual life of Muslims.

Christian Reflections

What can the Christian learn from a reflection upon on Islamic spirituality? What lessons can we draw that might enrich our encounters with Muslims? Where might we find ourselves challenged by seeing Islamic spirituality as lived by Muslims today? These questions I would like to address briefly in my concluding remarks.

The encounter with Islamic spirituality is a corrective to the current trend of our times, which is to view Islam, not as a religion, an approach to God and locus of divine action on human lives, but primarily as a geographical force. Politicians, journalists, and secular "experts" are preoccupied, some might say obsessed, with Islamic revival, fundamentalism, and political movements, but this is not the way that the Second Vatican Council documents and teachings of the recent Popes have taight us to approach Islam. Our approach as Christians is to seek "the seeds of the Word" and to "discover the treasures of human spirituality." For us, first and foremost, Muslims are fellow believers who claim, like us, spiritual descent from the faith of Abraham in the One God.

No doubt there are Muslims who understand Islam to be an all-embracing socio-political movement, and Christians who live among Muslims are rightly concerned about the implications this can have on their own lives. On the other hand, for all Muslims, whether or not they have any interest or involvement in politics, Islam is primarily an encounter, in faith and obedience, with God. If we hope to have any meaningful communication with Muslims, it must be on the grounds for our sometimes intersecting and sometimes divergent spiritualities. If this is true for the vast majority of Muslims

who are not involved in socio-political movements, it is also true for revivalist Muslims. If we are not prepared to talk about how God is at work in our lives in the modern world, we will have nothing of importance to say to Muslims.

If we ask ourselves why Islam seems to be so successful in today's world in retaining the allegiance and active commitment of Muslims despite the secularizing forces rampant in every corner of the globe, much of the reason would seem to lie in its effectiveness in instilling a sense of belonging and direct contact with God. The symbolism of prostration, the Ka'ba, going on pilgrimage, fasting, the greeting of Peace, washing the body, and standing on Arafat are still meaningful and effective ways of expressing spiritual realities that can only inadequately be put into words. In conforming to Islamic spirituality, Christians are challenged to ask whether the decline of symbolic representation of deep spiritual truths does not sometimes make our approach to religious practice too rationalistic and hence, unable to engage the whole person, body and soul.

It is too easy to dismiss the fact that Muslims rarely leave Islam to join another religion as simply due to fear of ostracism or even persecution by family, social milieu, or state. This is undoubtly sometimes the case, but the broader reason is that all the elements of Islamic spirituality fit together into a satisfying way of living before God. Moreover, Islamic spirituality has been succesful in creating a strong sense of belonging to a community. This often has come about precisely through those communal actions which involve the most difficult and physical inconvenience: the Ramadan fast, rising before dawn to pray, standing the blazing sun on Arafat. It would

seem to respond to a very human conviction: any regime that is too easy is not worth doing.

Observing the *shari'a* (and parallel development in Judaism), Christians have a tendency to dismiss these as religions of law. It is as though we remember Jesus' criticism of the legalism of the Pharisees without recalling his words that "not one jot or tittle of the law will be lost until all has been fulfilled." Islamic spirituality should remind us that it is legalism which Jesus condemns, an attitude that one is saved by performance, with a corresponding judgement passed on those who do not perform. Islam, as taught by the great spiritual masters like Al-Ghazali in the past and is still taught by many Muslim teachers today, knows that nothing is possible except through God's grace. All norms and regulations of the *shari'a* must be internalized and understood in the context of a believer's relationship to the Creator. Nothing is automatic or magical; there is no forgiveness without repentance, there is no prayer without a "movement of the heart," there is no true religiosity without concrete service to the neighbor in need.

Obviously, there are many Muslims who adopt a legalistic mentality and are intolerant of others. There are hypocritical Muslims who perform actions to be seen by others or to gain the prestige accorded to *hajjis*, for example, or to Sufi *shaykhs*. There are others who rationalize and compromise, who are faithful in prayer but corrupt in business practices. Some over emphasize certain elements of the Islamic tradition while conveniently forgetting others. There are fanatics, driven by a desire for hatred, power and revenge, who clothe their self-centered goals in religious garb. Self-critical Christians, who are not blind to similar occurences in the Christian community, must admit that these abuses of religiosity do not

negate the real depths of spirituality found in Islam when it is lived sincerely and humbly.

A real encounter of spiritualities can only take place if we perceive its value and are willing to give the time to it. In this paper, I have mentioned some of the elements of spirituality that are pf particular concern to Muslims because of the nature of their religion. They are often genuinely interested to know if these elements are found also in the religious life of Christians. But they often have a prejudice, not totally unfounded, that many Christians are so secularized that their spirituality is shallow and perfunctory. Many Muslims think we pray only once a week. Christians, on the other hand, are accustomed to talking about mattters of inner piety and our lives with God. We might rationalize and tell ourselves that Muslims are not interested in such matters or that they would feel insulted or that we were proselytizing should we speak about the deeper truths of our faith. I must confess, with some shame, that in the years I have lived among Muslims I have spoken about my personal life of faith and Christian spirituality far more than during my 14 years in Rome.

Christians must be confident of the riches of faith in God, sacramental life, love of neighbor, service to and defense of the poor, Christian fellowship, popular devotion, mysticism, the vast variety of forms and times of prayer, the action of the Spirit, retreats and programs of growth in holiness, lay movements old and new, vows, orders and monastic life, feasts and the liturgical year - all spiritual gifts with which God has blessed the Christian community over the centuries. The Christian who rejoices in the inner riches we possess knows that there is literally a world of things to discuss with Muslims.

The encounter between Christian and Muslim brings together two spiritual universes that demand mutual exploration.

From personal experience I can attest that Muslims, for whom God is the most "real" of all realities, show a genuine interest in the inner dimensions of the Christian's life with God. How do we pray? When do we pray? To whom do we pray? Who is Jesus Christ for us ? Where is Christ, in heaven or on earth? What do we do when we make a retreat? Why do we say Jesus has to die; could God have not found a more humane way to save us? Is committed celibacy posible? What is the purpose? Isn't it unnatural? What is a novitiate like? Why do we confess our sins when God is able and eager to forgive directly? What role does Mary play in our relation to God? If we claim to be freed from the law, what is a canon? Why can't Catholics get divorced? Who can be saved, only Christians, only some Christians, or others as well?

All these questions, and hundreds more as well, that have been raised to me personally by Muslims, touch upon issues of Christian spirituality. The questions are often poorly phrased, as are our questions to Muslims, but the interest that they imply is for all that no less genuine. The only satisfying manner of response is to draw upon the depths of our own tradition and to explain how the questions fit into our life as Chrsitians with God. In the encounter of spiritualities, the Christian and the Muslim are not out to convince one another that their way is superior. They are fellow travelers on the path, sharing from their lives. They are fellow believers in a modern world where it is not always easy to believe in God. For both, the crucial questions are: "How does God act in human lives and in society? How does God act in my life? How should I respond?"

In dialogue, the Christian and the Muslim find that many of the same concepts are expressed in different ways, and also that the same terms often refer to very different understandings of reality. They find that there are points of contact and points of divergence. In a Muslim-Christian encounter of spiritual realities, it is God who is most active of all, enlightening both with His abundant grace. Are we enriched by the encounter with Islamic spirituality? My answer, after all these many years, must be "yes". Are Muslims enriched by encountering Christian spirituality? I hope and pray they their answer also will be "yes".