Sketching a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology

Alan Richardson Lecture – 24 November 2009

David Burrell, C.S.C.

Hesburgh Professor emeritus, University of Notre Dame (IN, USA)
Professor of Ethics and Development, Uganda Martyrs, University, Nkozi, Uganda
Richardson Fellow – Michaelmas Term 2009 – Durham University

I resolved to share some fruits of my recent work with you on this occasion in gratitude for the term given me to work in this welcoming community. So let us straightway attempt to sketch Jewish-Christian-Muslim theologies across the centuries, as triggered by Regensburg. If we think of the way in which circumstances have catapulted Islam onto the world stage recently, with correlative study of Islam onto the academic stage as well, it matches in novelty the Vatican Council declaration on 'Christianity and Other Religions' [Nostra Aetate] slightly more than fifty years ago, which Karl Rahner's celebrated 'world-church' article limned in 1979.[1] Yet a recent book by Sidney Griffith (of Catholic University of America in Washington), resuming thirty years of scholarship in Syriac and Arabic-speaking Christianity as it related to Islam from the seventh century onwards, reminds us that this novelty is in fact a function of our western myopia.[2] And it has been fascinating to watch historians of early Christianity like Robert Wilken come to realize the need to expand their horizons into Arabic-speaking Christianity. For it is precisely Islam which signals that development, as Griffith notes in a way which can launch our inquiry:

> in the origins and full flowering of the distinctively Islamic *'ilm al-kalâm*, or reasoned discourse on important themes in the religious worldview, be it in the Mu'tazilite or Asharite traditions, one can often discern not only formal, methodological points of comparison with the discourse of earlier or contemporary Christian thinkers, in Greek, Syriac, or even Arabic texts, but also thematic continuities. … They were parallel exercises in wrestling with the same conceptual problems , within the same or comparable scriptural horizons, with which earlier traditions had wrestled (19).

And a valedictory statement summarizing a detailed treatment of exchange over the crucial early centuries suggests how his painstaking analysis might offer a way to rescue a term, *convivencia,* which has recently assumed the status of a slogan with reference to Andalusia in its Islamic 'golden age':

> To the degree that we may appropriate it to refer to the modes of accommodating reached between the dominant Islamic polity and the subaltern religious communities (Jews and Christians) in the wider world of Islam in 'Abbasid times (750-1258), the term and concept of *convivencia* seems particularly apt to invoke the intellectual and social history of those Christians who not only came to a new expression of their own traditions in Arabic, but in the process also made essential contributions to the growth and development of the classical culture of Islam (155).

It was a small-scale realization of that very fact in the life and work of Thomas Aquinas which had led me to Cairo to pursue and document his interaction with Islamic thinkers (Avicenna and Averroës) and a Jew with whom he felt deep affinities, Moses Maimonides, deeply immersed in the Islamicate, to show how Aquinas' chef d'oeuvre, the Summa Theologiae, widely recognized as the synthesis of Christian doctrine for the west,

was already an interfaith, intercultural achievement. Yet the fact that a bevy of western scholars had barely attended to this fact over centuries of scholarship reinforces Griffith's thesis about our myopia.[3] And my own as well, for my initial proposal for this term had focused uniquely on Christian-Muslim rapport, real or potential, thinking to economize by sidestepping Jewish contributions, until I recalled what I had come to appreciate thirty years ago: that one should never attempt to explore Christianity without attending to Judaism and to contemporary Jewish interlocutors. Moreover, adopting a western Christian optic, I had presumed little interaction on which to build my exercises in 'creative hermeneutics'—a presumption Sidney Griffith had deconstructed long ago and has effectively articulated in his recent capstone study. So this lecture affords me an opportunity to correct both distortions.

Yet all this, including my own acknowledged myopia, reinforces a thesis central to current exercises in 'comparative theology', yet long espoused by cultural anthropologists like Mary Douglas, regarding the way circumstances can help us emerge from the cultural isolation which power (above all) has imposed on us all in the west. Sidney Griffith can help us begin to appreciate the way circumstance has linked the development of Christian tradition with Judaism and with Islam as we may trace the intersection of three topics, to see how this has already taken place, and how it might be enhanced in this more propitious times. These neuralgic issues are only complicated by cultural difference: divine and human freedom, human initiative and divine grace, and trust in divine providence. To be sure, all three will find divergent schools among Christian theologians, signaling philosophical differences often exacerbated by denominational divides, yet the marked divergence prevails between western Christians and Muslims, normally exhibited in commonplace clichés like 'Islamic fatalism' or 'Islam has yet to undergo the enlightenment'. These are normally voiced with a characteristic smugness reinforced by perceptions emanating from a colonialist optic. In fact, two years spent making a new home in Uganda have made me keenly aware of the multiple ways in which the 'enlightenment' both inspired and justified colonialism, as well as underwriting its flourishing by considerable profits accruing. Key here is western celebration of 'the secular', so fairly and perceptively delineated in Charles Taylor's A Secular Age. So to become alert to the subterranean reactions these topics may elicit in us and from us, let us consider the ways they intersect with our work in theology, as well as in our 'ordinary life' and responses to events that impinge on it.

Let us begin with the place where freedom and grace encounter: trust in divine providence. Is it not fair to say that western reactions to the invitation to trust in God, ingrained in biblical teaching, tend to be skeptical, fueled by observations that 'God helps those who help themselves'; while Muslims (together with eastern Christians) will be inclined to respond to calamity or success with 'al-hamd'il'Ullah' (or 'mushkr Allah')—'thanks be to God'? Again, cultural factors loom crucially here, so we would be hard-pressed to predict how the next generation of Turks or of Bangladeshis living in the west will respond. Or to trace the difference to biblical versus Qur'anic sources, for my own inquiry finds rich parallels between al-Ghazali's (d. 1111) articulate development of this signal feature of Islam, tawakkul, in his 'summa of theology' [Ihya' Ulum ad-Dîn], and Jean-Pierre de Caussade's 1741 *L'Abandon a la Providence divine*, recently rendered in English as *The Sacrament of the Present* Moment (1982). While the parallels are telling, and his thesis proved deeply significant to generations of Catholic Christians intent on a life faithful to the gospels, one could hardly say that de Caussade has came to enjoy a central place in Christian piety, however coherent his thesis may be with an evangelical ethos. Yet from recent years in

Jerusalem in the midst of the Israeli-Palestinian standoff, I can testify how the attitude inscribed in 'al-hamd'il'Ullah' can help correct a tendency to confuse native optimism with the theological ethos of hope. In the face of endemically American queries about 'solving the problem there', Palestinian endurance—on the part of Christians as well as Muslims—can teach us a profound lesson, and has brought me to an acute sense of a hope rooted in an abiding trust in the presence of God.

Yet what might account for the difference between Muslims and western Christians in this regard? Has it something to do with an ethos generated by 'the enlightenment' whereby we in the west ceased to regard the universe as a locus of wonder, and began to look upon it as something to exploit for our own needs, much as the western powers' Conference of Berlin (in 1894) approached the entire continent of Africa? Could the current 'ecological crisis' be one of the uncounted legacies of the enlightenment? If so, might we have an opportunity, with Muslims now living in our midst, to recover a sense of gratitude and wonder at the blessings of the earth before it proves too late? When the 'God in whom we trust' (the motto engraved on American currency) is rather worshipped as the free creator of the universe, as Jews, Christians, and Muslims concur in avowing, does not trust come as a corollary, as both Ghazali and de Caussade insist? Yet we find that avowal to be more of a daily reality in the Muslim world than it is in a world once Christian. Why?

Attempting a response to that question leads us back to the other two topics: divine and human freedom, human initiative and divine grace. Each of these topics will find diverging parties among various Christian groups, of course, yet a closer look at the divergences reveals that the nub of both issues turns on the way we construe the free creation of the universe. Why must current philosophers of religion persist in think of human and divine freedom in zero-sum terms: one of us must win and the other lose? If human freedom can be purchased only by limiting the scope of God's activity, then all of us who contend that human beings must be accounted free—for any number of reasons--will have to make God less than a sovereign creator—precisely to 'leave room for' human freedom. Yet something like that seems to enjoy a virtual consensus even among avowedly Christian philosophers of religion in the west. Now Islam went through a similar debate early on in its history. For the freedom to act, along with taking responsibility for those actions, is utterly key to the demands of <u>shar'ia</u>; indeed the basis of any legal system anywhere, since (as Aristotle noted) it must be ingredient in any society which can call itself a society. The argument of one early Muslim group of religious thinkers, called Mu'tazilite (meaning 'set apart'), was straightforward: as God is originator of the universe, so creaures must be originators of their actions; otherwise, it would be unjust of God to blame them for contravening His law, nor could God praise them for adhering to it.

This venerable argument in favor of human freedom is here applied to human beings' relation to their creator. Yet the hidden premise is faulty, and dangerously so: if human free actions were not on a par with God's act of creating, the human action could not be free. Moreover, some current philosophers of religion, spooked by threats of 'determinism', have espoused the same identification to insist that human beings, to be free, must indeed <u>create</u> their acts. Yet these philosophers may be proceeding innocently of the need always to parse 'God' as 'creator', with all that can entail, so their God unwittingly becomes 'the biggest thing around'. It may even be that philosophical categories, in their actual use, reflect an implicit enlightenment rejection of a free creator, so as to infect this

train of thought. If so, then maybe it is we who have failed to 'face up to the enlightenment', in naively accepting such implicit premises. Here is a litmus test: is the 'God' of which you speak the free creator; and if so, how can that manner of causing the universe to come to exist and to perdure be compared with causing within the universe? If it cannot be, then there need be no conflict between divine and human agency; if can be, then how can we call such a 'creator' 'God'? So it seems that current Anglo-American philosophy of religion could profit a great deal from Islamic examples precisely to be faithful to their own criteria of reason. This observation underlies the initial response (in 2007) of 38 Muslim scholars to Benedict XVI's casual remarks about the relative absence of rational discourse in Islamic theology, taken from certain western scholars whom the Pope cited in defense of his exploratory assertion.

Sidney Griffith informs us of the extent of eastern Christian thinkers' reliance on Islamic models, while the way Thomas Aquinas appropriated both Jewish and Muslim thinkers to carve a coherent account of the activity of a free creator, in the face of formidable philosophical alternatives, has also been shown.[4] So failing to attend to Islamic thought in such recondite matters may in fact be more of a distortion of our age—the age of a western superiority which has spawned various forms of colonialism—than a persistent feature of Christian or of Jewish thought. (Indeed, Zionism fits the mold of a colonial venture on the part of modern Ashkenazi Judaism yet hardly fits the ethos of Jews resident in Islamic societies, who often participated as fully as they were able in the development of those polities.) Moreover, Aquinas' remarks about the limits of human discourse in speaking of God should instill some intellectual humility in all inquirers: that our efforts to signify divinity will--at best—be imperfect. And on closer inspection, to 'signify imperfectly' means we will get it wrong more often than not.

And since these issues remain quite intractable, there will be more to say from these Abrahamic traditions, given that no one of them can be presumed to 'get it right'. Critics of the later school of Islamic thought on the relation between divine and human freedom, the Ash'arites, can easily find their statements compromising human freedom. For once the premise implicit in Mu'tazilite thinking was detected--that humans must be creators of their actions if those acts are to be free-- a rival school emerged, named after one who had bolted from their ranks, al-Ash'ari, to insist that only God can create free actions though human being can perform them. If this sounds overly subtle—and it has to many for centuries—let us think of actions and their performance ethically rather than metaphysically: the actions which we perform are what they are, regardless of our attempt to name them differently. What they are will be subject to cultural modification, and even perspectival differences, of course--'terrorist' or 'freedom fighter', Derry' or Londonderry'--yet an action as recognizably commendable or reprehensible is just that, however we may choose to name it. Polemics and politics may keep us from acknowledging the act for what it is (i.e., the action which God creates), but to be honest with ourselves, as the final judgment will demand, we cannot pretend that we performed another action. So no matter how convenient it may be to denominate stealing as 'liberating', stealing it is unless we can identify extenuating circumstances which make the act of acquiring something belonging to another permissible, as in a starving person taking food belonging to another. Admittedly, disputed judgments can be made in such cases, yet in the measure that an act can be properly named, it is that action which we perform, and not one we create. So human actors need not be, in fact, cannot be creators of their actions, even though their acting is free. Both Ghazali and

Aquinas clarify this point succinctly in distinguishing human agents as 'secondary causes', with God as 'primary cause'. And while the relation between these two can be unclear, it will reflect the relation between creature and creator, returning us to an intractable issue which these traditions share, free creation, with unique relation which ensues between creator and creatures.

. As it turns out, nothing could better express the way Aquinas' formulation of the essence/existing distinction transforms Aristotle than to point out that what for Aristotle 'exists-in-itself' (substance) is for Aquinas derived from an Other in its very in-itselfness, or substantiality. Yet since the Other is the cause of being, each thing which exists-to the creator also exists-in-itself, for derived existence is no less substantial when it is derived from the One-who-is, which allows us to speak of existing things without explicitly referring them to their source. What Robert Sokolowski dubs 'the distinction', in other words, need not *appear*. But that simply reminds us how unique a non-reciprocal relation of dependence must be: it characterizes one relation only, that of creatures to creator. For if creator and creature were distinct from each other in an ordinary way, the relation--even one of dependence--could not be non-reciprocal; for ordinarily the fact that something depends from an originating agent, as child from parent, will mark a difference in that agent itself—as new parents realize dramatically!

Yet we must not misconstrue the fact that a cause of being, properly speaking, is not affected by causing all-that-is, thinking that implies remoteness or uncaring; indeed, quite the opposite. For the cause-of-being must cause in such a way as to be present in each creature as that to which it is oriented in its very existing. In that sense, this One cannot be considered as *other* than what it creates, in an ordinary sense of that term; just as the creature's *esse-ad* assures that it cannot *be* separately from its source. So Aquinas feels no compunction defining creation as the 'emanation of all of being from its universal cause (*emanatio totius entis a cause universali*)'.[5] Indeed, he could find no better way of marking the uniqueness of the causal relation of creation than using the term 'emanation' to articulate it.[6] And that *sui generis* descriptor should serve to divert us from imaging the creator over-against the universe, as an entity exercising causal efficacy in a manner parallel to causation within the universe. In short, if we work hard to 'get it right' about creation, there can be no 'zero-sum game' ('if I win, you lose') between creator and creatures.

That observation holds true especially for the final issue we shall consider: human initiative and divine grace. This proves to be another arena in which it helps to compare the ways in which Jewish and Muslim tradition approaches issues which Christians tend to label with *nature* and *grace*. While bestowing the Torah to Moses, and the Qur'an's 'coming down' to Muhammad are represented as divine actions in time, and indeed offer the promise of a fresh beginning in the relation of human beings to the creator, the record of subsequent communications with Moses or with Muhammad themselves takes second place to the role of Torah or of Qur'an in shaping the ensuing community of 'believers', precisely by relating them to the creator, the 'Lord of heaven and earth'. So everything in the divine-human transaction which stems from revelation can be subsumed under *providence*, as these passages concluding Maimonides *Guide of the Perplexed* display:

> Divine Providence is constantly watching over those who have obtained that blessing which is prepared for those who endeavour to obtain it. If man frees his thoughts from worldly matters, obtains a knowledge of God in the right way, and rejoices in that knowledge, it is impossible that any kind of evil should befall him

> while he is with God, and God with him (Guide 3.51) … The perfection, in which man can truly glory, is attained by him when he has acquired--as far as this is possible for man--the knowledge of God, the knowledge of His Providence, and of the manner in which it influences His creatures in their production and continued existence. Having acquired this knowledge, he will then be determined always to seek loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness, and thus to imitate the ways of God (Guide 3.54).

So the capacity to 'imitate the ways of God' comes from the creator to human beings, who can activate it by obtaining a knowledge of God in the right way and rejoicing in that knowledge. Moreover, for those who do, it is impossible that any kind of evil should befall them while they are with God, and God with them. And despite Maimonides celebrated 'intellectualism', he recommended assiduous fidelity to the commandments [*mitzvot*] of the Torah as a sure way to attain to the saving 'knowledge of God' securing people from 'any kind of evil'.

Perhaps these traditions are not so prone to use the term 'grace' because all that comes from a free creator *ipso facto* represents a gracious gift from the 'Lord of heaven and earth', while Christians have been schooled to distinguish a *supernatural* arena of *grace* from that of *nature*, so will be prone to trace the relations between these two discrete domains. Why? Perhaps initially because of the palpable presence of the Word made human among us, extended in the presence of the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit. Yet for Christians too *nature* represents the undeserved gift of a free creator, so all is gift. Patristic sources always portray the divine actions of creating and redeeming in tandem, like twin foci of an ellipse, so we should expect to find a similar approach in theologians celebrating a return to those very sources, like Henri de Lubac, as well as those profiting from the *ressourcement*, like Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Having recourse to the longer and wider tradition to critique a nature/grace dichotomy reminiscent of baroque counter-reformation theology, they recall us to 'all is gift', noting how God's ways of acting in creation, and of interacting with intentional creatures, are more distinct from our side than from God's---as Maimonides observed.

For Islam, the Word of God in the Holy Qur'an has an instinctive drawing power to a human mind and heart [*fitra*] so oriented from its divine origination, so that fidelity to the power of that Word will continue to draw believers closer to its source, by the 'straight path' along which the Sufi tradition has identified fixed 'stations' to serve as markers along the way to 'proximity with God'.[7] And as with Christian spiritual guides like John of the Cross, the closer we come to the wellspring of all activity in the universe, the less our actions come from us, reflecting our perspectives, and the more they display the sustaining and leading power of God. So along this path all indeed is *grace*. And if we keep in mind the comparative parallels between the Qur'an and Jesus, we will understand why Muslims regularly use the punning ambiguity of the term *sura*—meaning *verse* [of the Qur'an] as well as *sign*—to insist that those imbued with the Qur'an will be able to recognize things of this world as signs of their creator, as Augustine, in book ten of the *Confessions,* was able finally to hear things "say 'We are not God' and 'he made us' "(10.5.9).[8] For absent the *verses* of a revelatory book, things will at best be what they are, and fail to function as *signs* of their origin. But the Sufi goal is to live and work amid things that are signs as well, ever leading us closer to their source. And since we are then caught up in 'returning' to the One what originally emanates from that same One, there can be no violence in this ascent, except

towards the "dog which is always with you, indeed, inside your skin—named Resentment. It does not stop biting you and biting others." Using this example to illustrate the 'station' of trusting in divine providence, al-Ghazali goes on to suggest the quality of discipline required to tame this animal within: "but if this dog becomes subservient to you to the extent that when it becomes agitated and irritated, it will be subject to you instantaneously, then you may enhance your rank to the point where a lion, the very king of beasts, will be subject to you."[9] So the more we attain proximity to the source of all, the more will we be at peace and in harmony with all of creation. All is grace when one realizes that all is gift.

We should now be in a better position to appreciate how fruitful comparative study of these three Abrahamic faiths can be: a fruitfulness realized in each participant with regard to their own faith, as well as appreciation of the faith of others. Yet western Christians have hardly been aware of the way Christians who quite suddenly found themselves in the Dar al-Islam in the seventh century responded to the challenge by developing a theology in response to the unanticipated presence of this power which came to stay. For five subsequent centuries Islam remained a specter to the west until Europe emerged to wage a series of wars to recover the 'Holy Land' from these infidels. In the wake of that century-long conflict, however, Arabic texts were circulated in the Mediterranean, and translations commissioned in the Kingdom of the two Sicilies, where Thomas Aquinas was reared. Moses Maimonides, an extraordinary Jewish thinker originally from Cordoba and living in Cairo (celebrated in the adage: 'from Moses to Moses, there was none like Moses'), composed the *Guide for the Perplexed*, which inspired Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* on several key points, once it was translated from Judaeo-Arabic into Latin. For the ensuing four centuries until the Ottoman defeat in the battle of Vienna (in 1683), however, standoff prevailed, punctuated by military encounters. By this time, however, European exploitation of the 'new world' had rendered the famous 'Silk Road' redundant, effectively sidelining Islam and bringing prosperity to the west. Then Napoleon's landing in Alexandria in 1799, along with Clive's exploits in India, signaled the end of two great Muslim empires, Ottoman and Mogul, so the rest, as they say, is history. Yet the end of political colonization and the seventy-year interlude of Soviet Marxism has had unexpected consequences for Islam and the west which we continue to monitor without understanding very well. So this robustly theological project intends to contribute to alleviating an ignorance of the world of Islam which has been the fruit of centuries of western inattention. Yet with Charles Taylor we must acknowledge how all this has been made possible by a secular ethos which has allowed some key Islamic thinkers to put the oppositional 'Dar al-Islam / Dar al-Harb' behind them, to discover the entire world as the 'Dar al-Dawa'.[10] Yet progress along this promising path will ask adherents of each tradition to come to appreciate as well as respect one another's faith, inevitably reflecting the perspective each person brings with them, while allowing it to be expanded and enriched by the other. There is an exchange and communication involved here which may well presume commonalities quite beyond our capacity to articulate, for God, after all is One.

---

[1] Karl Rahner, 'Towards a Fundamental Interpretation of Vatican II,' *Theological Studies*.40 (1979).

[2] Sidney H. Griffith: The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: World of Islam (Princeton NJ; Princeton University Press, 2008).

---

[3] See Robert Wilken, "Christianity Face to face with Islam,"(2008 Erasmus lecture) First Things (Jan 2009) (http://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/12/001-christianity-face-to-face-with-islam-12)

[4] See my Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), and Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

[5] *ST*, I, 45, 1.

[6] See my *Knowing the Unknowable God* (note 3) 86-91.

[7] See the discussion of 'stages' (and 'stations')in Sufi spirituality in Sachiko Murata and William Chittick, *Vision of Islam* (St Paul MN: Paragon House,1994) for an introduction to Islam addressing theological questions in a manner incorporating both Sufi and Shi'ite traditions.

[8] Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press,1991).

[9] Al-Ghazali, *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence*, trans. David Burrell (Louisville KKY: Fons Vitae, 2001) 108.

[10] Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).