

The Metamorphosis of the Notion of *Love of God and of « Neighbor »*

An Interpretation of the Root *hbb* [to love] in the Koran

From November 4th to 6th, 2008, an important Catholic-Muslim symposium was held in Rome, which gathered together two delegations of 29 representatives each. Its main theme: « Love of God and Love of Neighbor, » had been delineated in: *A common Word Between Us and You*, the *Letter of the 138* Islamic scholars to Pope Benedict XVI and Christian leaders. It presented Islam as « religion of love of God and love of *the close one* », according to the Arabic version of the *Letter*. "The-close-one", *al-jar* in Arabic, means "the-closest-to-me", a sense far from the universal reach of the word *neighbor* – *al-qarib* in Arabic –, which Jesus uses in Luke 10:23-37 (parable of the good Samaritan), as the main promoter of this symposium, [Samir Khalil](#) commented. The nuance is significant enough but the English version of the *Letter* leveled it out. So, what then? Perspectives for the future, or deadlock?

Not without leaving unaddressed a couple of important questions, the final declaration of the symposium does advocate « respect of the person and his or her choices in matters of conscience and religion, » given the acknowledged basis of « common rights. » The affirmation of such a principle is essential, this could not be emphasized enough. Furthermore, it insists upon « renouncing any oppression, aggressive violence, terrorism, especially when perpetrated in the name of religion. »

A few Muslim signatories showed a certain degree of hesitancy as to some of the formulations that could have caused them problems, but the step was finally taken. These principles come to the fore strengthened with the prospect of another gathering scheduled for before 2010. Even if this symposium has so far scarcely been echoed in Islamic countries, it could very well in the future. Doubtlessly, one of the main ambiguities regards the question of the communal rights to be fought for. Islamic communities in the West, which the text seriously presents as being oppressed, are paralleled with the fate of Christians in Islamic countries, whose lives are often really threatened, not to mention about their possessions and children.

The final declaration of the symposium also leans towards giving credence to an implicit idea, namely: that all religions are equally good, while the straying from religion's genuine purpose to excesses is assuredly blameful. Indeed, such an idea could hardly not have been propounded. It has been sanctioned for more than twenty years in the mainstream media, and Muslim intellectuals echo it as well. We will not dwell on this. Instead, we want to take a close look at the Koranic text in order to really know what it actually says or wants to say regarding the *love of God and of the close one* – according to the words of the under-title in Arabic which gave its theme to the symposium.

• Occurrences of the Root *hbb* [to Love]

First of all, it is fitting to locate in the Koranic text the several instances of the root *hbb*, to love. The number of cases matters: 133. We find this root essentially in its verbal form and in a variety of contexts, a little like its English equivalent. The substantive form barely appears, in most cases in connection with the verb. With the exception of verse 2.165 (where the root *hbb* appears 4 times), the expression « *love of God* » (*hubb Llahi*) is not to be found, but man is said or invited to love God four times (2.177; 3.31; 5.54 + 24.22 to love the fact that God forgives). Reference is sometimes made, in a negative fashion, to « the love of possessions/things » (*hubb* 3.14; 76.8; 89.20; 1008), as well as, from a contrary position, to not *loving/liking* them (38.32; 49.12; 61.13; 75.2; 76.27; 89.20 + 6.76 where Abraham is said not to love fleeting things). One

can also *love* (**hbb**) a desirable goal (3.152.188; 9.108 + 49.7 the faith made lovable). The root scarcely appears to convey the human sentiment/feeling of love (3.119; 7.79 [negatively]; 12.8.30; 28.56 [obscure meaning]).

Inversely, the root **hbb** shows up quite often in reference to God's attitude towards men, for instance, in such somewhat stereotyped expressions as: « God loves those who purify themselves, or the pious ones, or those who repent, etc. » (about twenty times in the course of the Koranic text). They seem overall fairly restrictive. Others are expressly negative: God does **not** love those who violate summons (to fight, 2.190; not to make unlawful, 5.87; not to trespass the bounds of privacy, 7.55), disorder (2.205), the usurer *kafir* (= *infidel* or *wicked* – 2.276), *kafirs* (3.32), wrongdoers (3.57.140), the arrogant and vainglorious (4.36), he who gives to perfidy and crime (4.107), evil speech (4.148), mischievous **Jews** (5.64), the wasters (6.141; 7.31), the treacherous (8.58), the boastful one (16.23), traitors to faith or *kafir-s* (22.38), the bragger who exults (28.76), those who do mischief (28.77), the unfaithful or *kafirs* (30.45), any arrogant boaster (31.18; 57.23), evildoers (42.40).

One must not forget that to be rejected from the love of God means to be doomed to hell-fire: the Jews, who incur God's wrath (as affirmed in sura **1**, the *Fatiha* introducing prayer), are marked for irrevocable condemnation to dwell therein (2.80; 3.24; 4.46-47; 5.78 etc. + 98.6), joining up with Christians (targeted in the introductory *Fatiha* as well + 4.51.116; 5.33.72; etc.).

• A God Who Does Not Love Those Who Do Not Sacrifice All to Him

The vision put forward in the Koran becomes clearer. Never is the Koran affirming that God loves all men. He nevertheless appears as loving some, which can also be accounted for in the Bible. However, in the latter, the language expressing God's favor is typically balanced with affirmations of His universal love. Such affirmations are not to be found in the Koran. Likewise, if God is said to be merciful – repeatedly so throughout the Koran – one must understand that He “chooses for His special mercy whom He wills.” (2.105; 3.74; etc.) To come up with the notion of universal love on the part of the God of Islam, the authors of the final declaration of the Roman symposium have had to appeal to a word, allegedly preserved in tradition, spoken by Muhammad: “a *hadith* indicates that God's loving compassion for humankind is greater, even than that of a mother for her child (Muslim, *Bab al-Tawba* 21)”. However, other *hadiths*, from the 600,000 that have been fabricated, point to the opposite direction. The purport was notwithstanding commendable.

All in all, in the Koran and according to the spirit of Islam's tradition, only one category of men is loved by God, a state of affairs that particularly comes to the fore in the last Koranic verse in which God is said to love:

Llāha yuḥibbu llaḍīna yuqātilūna fī sabīli-hī : God loves those who go so far as to kill *in His way* (formula signifying: *for His cause*) (**61.4**).

Let us not delude ourselves as to translate the 3rd form (*to go so far as*) of the verb *qatala*, *to kill*, as *to fight*. This would simply amount to conveniently shifting the meaning. The notion of *fighting* does not imply in and of itself that of *killing*. Besides, the notion of *wrestling-fighting*, as that of *effort*, is expressed by another verb, *jahada* (from which we derive *jihad*, *wrestle*). Those whom God loves are those ready to kill for Him.

This state of affairs is not without distressing Pope Benedict XVI, as well as some Muslim people affirming not to recognize themselves in a Koranic tradition they claim to be ill-adapted to our times. But, was it more in the seventh-century? In fact, it is necessary to understand the logic implicit to the text beyond the immediate perception that stumbles with the question: how can a God, whom we imagine good, approve of evil actions, while ordering the good and forbidding evil? For centuries this question has presented itself as a dead end in which philosophy sinks in attempting to understand what Islam is. It all begins to make a little more sense if we get onto the whole issue another way.

Let us consider the symposium's second theme, namely: « Love of Neighbor. » In the Koran, the concern is with love as it relates to those who are *near* (*relatives, friends in a neighborhood*). It does not regard whoever becomes *the neighbor*, let alone enemies. There is the exception of one verse (Sura *al-Imran* v.119), which must be read following what precedes:

3.118 « O you who believe! Take not as confidants those outside yourselves [...] Hatred has already appeared from their mouths [that of the people doomed to hell, cf. v.116], but what their hearts conceal is far worse... »

3.119 « You, **you are those who love them**, but they do not love you; and you believe **in the whole Book**. When they meet you, they say: "We believe." But, when they are alone, they bite off the very tips of their fingers at you in their rage. Say: "Perish in your rage" » (Saudi traduction IFTA)

3,119 : hā-'antum 'ulā'i tuḥibbūnahum wa-lā yuḥibbunakum wa-tu'minūna **bi-l-kitābi kullihī** wa-'idā laqūkum qālū 'āmannā wa-'idā ḥalaw 'aḍḍū 'alaykumu l-'anāmila mina l-ḡayzi qul mūtū bi-ḡayzikum

• When Love Turns Into a Justification of Hatred

To come to grip with the extent of the significance of these verses, it is necessary to identify those who are pointed at: they are said to be filled with hatred towards true believers and to adhere only to parts of the « Book ». Which Book? It cannot be the Koran, which does not yet exist, and which one never *partially* believes in. The reproval frequently encountered in the Koran with respect to « hiding » a portion of the Book (2.23; 4.51; etc.) « while they know it » provides a good clue. It always points to the (rabbinic) Jews which it blames, not just for some partial pushing aside of the teachings, say of the Prophets (*ketuvim*), but rather for radically rejecting the Book. But, as has been shown [1], the « whole Book » frequently referred to as prototype and held to be kept in Heaven, is "*the Torah and the injil*"-gospel (singular). On earth, it presents itself under the form of a *Lectionary* (in Arabic, *qur'an*) used by true « believers » when they gather together, which obviously is one and the same as the « Koran » about which the Koranic text itself refers more than 60 times [2]. Of this *Book*, the rabbinic Jews cannot but reject the second part, the *injil* derived from the Gospel of Matthew. They systematically reject any reference or indication as to Jesus's Messiahship (Jesus, called *Messiah* 11 times in the current form of the Koran). Such a refusal, according to the Koran, provides the explanation as to why God cannot love the Jews and dooms them all to hell. One only has to read [3], and the whole theory falls into place.

Now here in sura *al-Imran*, one might be surprised with the attitude full of "good sentiments" expressed in verse 119: the true believers are said to **love** the (rabbinic) Jews. Yet, the verse continues: because the latter hate the former (v.118), they all the more deserve to be detested. The true believers are accordingly set in the position of the **victims** who only have got to defend themselves. Is this not precisely what the Islamic posture is characteristically all about?

1 Edouard-Marie Gallez, *Le messie et son prophète*, tome II (Paris: éditions de Paris, 2005) 180-216. The book: *Qui sont les chrétiens du Coran*, published by Cerf Editions, is an outdated translation of a study first published in German in 2005, which ignores *Le messie et son prophète* and very poorly lays and addresses the problems which the latter already has precisely shed light upon.

2 Among these occurrences, it is necessary to subtract that which have been subsequently added with the intention of suggesting the self-designation of the Koran, understood as a book that does not yet exist but which, thanks to a divine miracle, refers to itself as a complete book.

3 One of the keys of interpretation here arises from the meaning of the root *kfr* so often used throughout the Koran and which, in later « Koranic » sermons nurturing the fishpond wherefrom the Koran of caliphs will emerge, is distortedly applied to rabbinic Judaism (cf. Edouard-Marie Gallez, *La racine kfr, importance et significations bibliques, post-bibliques et coraniques*, in *Le texte arabe non islamique. Actes du colloque de Toulouse [2007]*, coll. *Studia Arabica* XI, éd. de Paris, janvier 2009, 67-87). See kfr-recouvrir.htm.

The underlying logic here is implacable. The true believer **loves** humankind. The salvation of the world is his goal, and this goal is so great that it is well worth all sacrifices. The end justifies the means, because it greatly exceeds man individually, or even as a community. Human life is but naught in the face of the salvation wished by God. In return, the God of love **loves** those who sacrifice all to Him and are willing "to go as far as to kill" for His sake. And it is He who takes upon Himself the responsibility of the massacres perpetrated in His Name (8.17; 9.14; etc.).

As far as the reasoning is concerned, no mistake is there to be found. It is the goal that is questionable, not the means, presented as legitimate in the light of two reasons: ● First, in view to the end quest after ● Second, because he who "fights in God's way" is automatically the victim of other men who, under the hold of Satan, are maintained in ignorance (*jahiliyya*) of Islamic Revelation, or worst, reject it. Such are the ones who prevent those God has chosen (3.110) to serve Him by taking over the whole world. As Muslim, a believer is always pure and always the victim of non-Muslims, whatever he does. Present-day preachers don't miss an opportunity to make the point clear: Islam is Good. Islam is pure. A similar mindset has sometimes been seen at work among baptized people turning Christianity into a travesty through nationalistic commitments and degenerating it into a cause to be fought for. Nevertheless, this alteration of Christianity's authentic meaning and the outrage it gave rise to scandalized Christian conscience.

● Moving Beyond Lies to Look Forwards Together to the Future

The unique bottom line question therefore is the following: has God revealed to man a system allowing him to root up evil from this world? If so, everything holds together. The philosophical blind alley of a God standing surety for evil acts vanishes into thin air. Those whom God has chosen above all others ^[4] stand in a position to assert that they **love** God. They adore a God who holds them up above all others. They can also declare that they **love** these *others*, even when they butcher them, snatch their children, banish them away from their own countries, etc. The Koranic faithful **loves** God and other people. *Other people*, however, while they should be grateful to the Koranic faithful, hate him instead.

Unmistakably, we are here dealing with a radical alteration of the Biblical Revelation, most specifically, with a radical alteration of the Revelation of Jesus. No seventh-century man could have made this up. So *drastic* a revision, that is, altering down to the root system itself, could only have resulted from the dissident influence and making of first-century people sufficiently familiar with the Apostles and the Judeo-Christian milieu of the early apostolic Church. The mention above regarding "Torah and injil" was not brought up in vain. Indeed, it gives indication as to the milieu wherein lies the point of departure. There is a sense in which Islam is but the very perpetuation of an original turnover of the Revelation of God's Love in Jewish milieu. In truth, was not Christianity itself exclusively, or by a very large majority, a Jewish phenomenon, and so throughout several generations? Such a perspective allows the taking of some steps back vis-a-vis the history of « the Arab Prophet » (whose biography was first put together two centuries after the alleged events), in favor of a more objective historical scholarship freed from its a priori conceptions.

The question raised above may now disclose its real stakes: *has God revealed to man a system allowing him to root up evil from this world?* If we say that such a mean of salvation does not exist, or, in other words, that our world is inexorably doomed to evil, all that is left to give a semblance of meaning and order to this life is a fear of the hereafter.

Such discourses legitimize the Islamists's agenda. Jesus says a lot more. The New Testament bears witness to it, though one does need to take the pain of turning to places regrettably left basically unread today. Some current trends in prevailing circles of biblical scholarship have been pulled towards ideological reinterpretations of parts of the Gospels while

4 The ideal society possesses the form of a theocracy whose height is God Himself, followed by His faithful ones, each according to his rank, etc. (2.178.221; 4.25; 6.165; 16.71.75.76; 24.33; 30.28; 61.9; etc. In 3.55, we read: «O Jesus [...] I will make those who follow you superior to those who have *kfr* [who reject Faith or infidels] ».

disavowing others. But it is precisely to those that we urgently ought to return so as to read them afresh. Not in the light of contemporary exegetical studies, which on the questions at stake here have overall demonstrated their uselessness, but together with Jewish and Muslim friends who will not fail to raise up the right questions.

Interreligious dialogue is critical – Pope Benedict XVI has made it very clear from the outset of his pontificate – and more so than ever in times such as ours where people are massively misinformed and manipulated to the core. But there exists no guarantee whatsoever that a « dialogue » such as that which just took place in Rome will have the effect of keeping off the perspective of grievous troubles in our cities. Its final declaration can only be a step. Never can we expect to lenify rancor and hatred by simply coating them with the word « love. »

Nor are we to help the temperature of dissentient or warlike discourses spoken in the name of God drop in by breaking the thermometer of words.

This article was first published under the title: *La cause de l'amour selon l'islam* in *Liberté Politique*, Spring 2009, n° 44, p. 55-61.

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