

Book Reviews

Monks and Muslims: Monastic and Shi'a Spirituality in Dialogue
ed. Mohammad Ali Shomali and William Skudlarek, 2012. Collegetown,
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A remark of Frithjof Schuon, quoted in the introduction to this collection of papers, reminds us of the saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad: *la rahbaniyah fi al-islam*, generally translated: 'There is no monasticism in Islam'. Yet the judgement of Islamic theology and ethics on the monastic movement in Christianity cannot simply be described as one of condemnation; the Qur'an refers both to monasticism and to monks in terms which on the one hand recognise the laudable motivations of devotion to the goal of divine contemplation which underlie the whole endeavour, while on the other hand condemn what are seen as the excesses of asceticism in which that results, as well as the corruptions to which it is prone (5:82; 9:31; 9:34; 57:27). There is, then, a certain ambivalence within the Islamic attitude: even while the organised expression of monastic life may be seen as having no place in Islam, the impulse from which that life springs may equally be seen as an appropriate response of the human creature to his or her Creator, the servant to the Lord.

From the point of view of those committed to it, that impulse is none other than the response of Christian discipleship, expressed in a particularly intense and committed form. From their first appearance in third century Egypt, Christian monks and nuns, whether living in eremitic solitude or coenobitic community, saw their way of life as simply an attempt to live in the utmost faithfulness to the Gospel. In our own time, there is evidence of a widespread concern to reposition monasticism in relation to that primary and universal motivation of vocation to the

service of God. For example, various forms of ‘new monasticism’ are now appearing alongside the traditional orders; organisations such as the World Community for Christian Meditation seek to develop the idea of a ‘monastery without walls’, defined by network rather than enclosure; I have been very struck by the comment made to me by an experienced Benedictine, that ‘inside each person living in the world there is a bit of a monk or a nun trying to get out’.

It is important to have in mind these wider connections and resonances in considering the possibilities of dialogue between monastic Christianity and other faiths, as otherwise monastic encounter with a non-monastic religion like Islam might seem fruitless. The worldwide movement of ‘monastic inter-religious dialogue’ has indeed most obviously flourished in encounters between Christian monastics on the one hand and Buddhist or Hindu monastics on the other, but the present volume is a reminder of the potential for dialogue that there also is between monastic Christians and (non-monastic) Muslims, provided that dialogue is set within a broad framework of response to the God who reveals his Word to humans.

Monks and Muslims brings together presentations made at the fourth in a series of encounters between Roman Catholic Benedictines and Iranian Shi‘a Muslims, a process which began in Ampleforth Abbey in 2003, and which has also involved encounters in the seminaries of Qum, Iran. Given this background, it is inevitable that the volume will have a certain specificity to it which means that other perspectives are not included. For example, there are no voices from monastics outside the Roman Catholic Church (including Anglicans and Eastern Orthodox), or from the new monastic movements; nor are there any Sunni contributions – in particular, the experience of the Sufi orders is not represented here. However, this limitation should not be seen as a deficiency in the volume but rather as a helpful focus, which in turn points to the potential for wider interactions.

The fifteen contributors present in turn monastic Christian and Shi‘a Muslim papers on seven topics, arranged in a logically progressive sequence as follows: ‘revelation’; ‘*lectio divina*’, i.e. the practice of reading divinely revealed scripture; ‘prayer’; ‘public prayer’ (the boundary between this and the previous topic is rather differently drawn in the various papers); ‘witness within the community’; ‘witness in the world’; and ‘dialogue’. Of course, the approaches of the different contributors

differ widely, but the overall schema does lend a genuine coherence to the whole book. I offer reflections on just three of these seven themes – respectively, '*lectio divina*', 'witness', and 'dialogue'.

Setting side by side the presentations by Guido Dotti and Farrokh Sekaleshfar, it is possible to see some really interesting parallels between the practice of monastic *lectio divina* and the exercise of *muraqabah* ('self-scrutiny') in relation to the reading of scripture. As classically expounded by the twelfth-century Carthusian writer Guigo II, the former is described as a spiritual ladder with four rungs; drawing on the writings of 'Allamah Tabataba'i, Sekaleshfar identifies four steps in the latter also. The resonances are all the more significant for not being contrived, cast as they are in very different language; yet in both cases they point to the sense of a real change in the reader of scripture through his or her consciousness of reading the revealed text in the presence of the God who stands behind it as its Revealer. For me, this points to the fruitful possibilities within inter-religious encounter which can be generated by the practice known as 'scriptural reasoning'. In a practical sense this refers simply to the reading by faithful Christians and Muslims of Bible and Qur'an in the presence of and in partnership with one another. Spiritually, at its most fecund it can lead to the real enrichment of both parties through participatory exposure to the other's encounter with God in *lectio divina*. It would have been interesting in particular to know what conversations might have been generated, and what insights gained, through a shared reading by the group both of the Qur'anic and *hadith* texts on monasticism referred to above, and also of those Biblical passages which have traditionally been seen as intimations of the monastic life (for example, references in the Hebrew scriptures to Nazirites; passages relating to John the Baptist; Luke's account of Jesus in the house of Martha and Mary).

An understanding of the disciplined life of monastic Christians and Shi'a Muslims as a 'witness', both within the religious community and more widely to the world, is a central theme for several contributors to the volume. Moreover – though this dimension is not explicitly developed at length in this book – there is also a mutuality to this in the inter-religious context: faithful witness to God by Muslims can be a real stimulus and encouragement to Christians, and *vice versa*. The former is perhaps discernible in the very origins of the conversations which led to the production of this and other volumes in the series: in a surprising and

paradoxical way, the presence of visibly practising Muslim communities in the traditional heartlands of Western Christendom have served to revitalise Christian life and witness, particularly in the public arena. Thus the contemporary historian of religion Philip Jenkins has written: ‘However counterintuitive this may seem, the advent of Islam might also be good news for European Christianity’ (*God’s Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe’s Religious Crisis*, 2007). In the other direction, several of the Christian contributors mention the importance of the faithful witness of the Cistercian monks of the monastery of Our Lady of the Atlas, Tibhirine, Algeria. Remaining present throughout the violent terror campaign of the Islamist GIA, and the harsh counter-insurgency of the Algerian army, seven of the monks ultimately witnessed to God through their assassination after being kidnapped in the spring of 1996. But their life also had been an act of divine witness, shared in community with their Muslim neighbours – a sharing which became the subject matter of profound theological reflection in the writings of Fr. Christian de Chergé, prior of the community. That most eloquent example of witness was in an emphatically Sunni context of Islam; how deeply might Christian-Muslim encounter be enriched by, say, the presence of a monastic community in Qum!

The seventh and final theme is ‘dialogue’, and here it seems to me that the book fails to deliver as much as might have been hoped. This is not because the contributors do not regard dialogue as important; on the contrary, the two last papers, by Timothy Wright and Mohammad Shomali, set out its importance and its potential with conviction and eloquence. However, the results of dialogue are not really reflected in the structure of this volume, which simply offers to readers the papers as presented, without attempting to capture any of the interactions experienced or insights gained in the seminar itself. This is in one sense quite understandable, as it is notoriously difficult to present the dynamism and warmth of a stimulating conversation to those who are not part of it; nevertheless, it does feel a bit of a lost opportunity not to try to indicate something of that sense of dialogue in practice. That said, this book, in the variety yet coherence of its themes, in the sometimes surprising resonances discernible between Christian and Muslim contributions, and above all in the sense it bears of a shared and mutually respectful endeavour to be open to one another, is a valuable record of an encounter between monastic Christians and Shi’a Muslims,

and an encouraging pointer to other possibilities for those who share a disciplined commitment to seek the face of God.