ISLAMIC THEOLOGY AS A CHANCE FOR DIALOGUE AND MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL APPROACH OF A COMPLEX PHENOMENON

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﴿يأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُم مِّن ذَكَرٍ وَأُنثَى وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوباً وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ﴾

[O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).]

Q. 49/13

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﴿ ٱدْعُ إِلِى سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِٱلْحِكْمَةِ وَٱلْمَوْعِظَةِ ٱلْحَسَنَةِ وَجَادِلْهُم بِٱلَّتِى هِىَ أَحْسَنُ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَن ضَلَّ عَن سَبِيلِهِ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِٱلْمُهْتَدِينَ ﴾

[Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for thy Lord knoweth best, who have strayed from His Path, and who receive guidance.]

Q. 16/25

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﴿ قُلْ يأَهْلَ ٱلْكِتَابِ تَعَالَوْا إِلَى كَلَمَةٍ سَوَاءٍ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمْ [...]﴾

[Say: „O people of the book, come to common terms as between us and you…"]

Q. 03/64

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Abstract

Despite the numerous academic attempts in the last centuries, trying to clarify some basic issues concerning Islam, particularly current complex phenomena as the so-called terrorism or islamophobia, the discussion seems to be very far away from a final evaluation. The diversity of the related religious, political, social and cultural dimensions reveals the need to benefit from the efforts of different disciplines in this regard.

The establishment of *Islamic Theology* as a field of study in some Western and European countries is certainly a critically significant event, which is inextricably connected to the whole debate about Islam in the last years.

Based on this socio-religious context in the era of Globalisation, this work aims to examine the following questions: How is the Islamic reception of dialogue particularly in Qurʾān? Could Islamic Theology, especially as a socio-cultural and academic issue, represent a chance for dialogue? Does this discipline have any impact or arguable responses in the challenge of/confrontation with destructive phenomena such as religious radicalism, Islamophobia etc.? In other words, how can this discipline contribute to a better understanding of Islam and Muslims around the World? What would be the academic, socio-cultural and religious impact of this issue on the young Muslim generation(s) living in European or "Western" socio-cultural context?

While approaching this phenomenon, it seems unavoidable to deal with many related issues as well, that are also certainly relevant in this context. That is why it is a rewarding task for modern researchers to analyse the possible interconnectivity between Studying Islam and understanding it.

Based on the example German example, where this field of study has already become a recognized sector within five universities, this Paper tries to give some thoughts about the aforementioned questions as a contribution from an Islamic-theological perspective, putting particularly the light on the Islamic conception of dialogue and further related subject matters.

Keywords: Islam, Theology, Dialogue, Globalisation

Introduction

Years ago, when I was granted the opportunity as a young Muslim student to study the subject of *Islamic Studies* in Germany, many of my relatives, friends and colleagues repeatedly used to confront me with a touchy/sensitive question, that seemed to be interesting yet complicated at the same time: "Why/how do you study Islam in a Western country?(!)"[1] The background intention behind this particular question may have differed from person to person. Whereas some of my Muslim inquirers had a critical view on this kind of study, some others, especially German or western non-Muslim friends were curious to find out: What could be interesting for a Muslim to be willing to study his own religion in a different socio-religious context?

This inspired me to follow my own deep reflection process concerning these questions in order to discover - primarily for myself and secondly for my inquirers - the significance of such an inter-cultural experience. My initial answer to this question was principally related to the idea of *dialogue between cultures and religions*, which is - in my humble opinion and with respect to the current situation in the world - now leaving the position of being a simple luxurious alternative of communication between intellectuals and scholars but to view it as a universal necessity for the whole of humanity. During my studies at the University of Tubingen, famous for being an ancient established centre for academic researches about Islam and oriental cultures,[2] I considered the exchange with orientalists who revealed the western perception of Islam was one of the most fructuous results of my studies. In fact, I finally came to the conviction, that Muslims should not only know and understand their own religion, but also have to be perfectly aware of the thoughts and conclusions of the "Other" towards Islam, even if they seem to be *prima facie* in clear contradiction with their own religious convictions. In addition, I argue that Islam´s emphatic appeal and encouragement to mankind to enter in both inter- and intra-faith relationships beyond ethnic, social and religious borders, ideologies and personal convictions is an initial and intrinsic part of Islam´s conception of world peace, not outside of it.

Due to many extreme political and cultural changes in the world today, and within a society that is comprised of multiple ethnic, religious, social and political strains, the same question, which I have been asked for many years, has now returned, but this time in the following slightly reconverted way: Why do western countries not only work towards an

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[1] The exclamation mark is between parentheses to indicate that some -but not all- people who asked me this question expresses their astonishment or critical position.

[2] The University of Tubingen has played a very important role in the process of establishing Islamic Studies as a subject of academic researches. In addition to the so-called "Islamic Studies", established long ago, Islamic Theology has now become a separate subject of study.

orientalist approach to Islam, but recently also promote the study of Islamic *Theology*? Although the current debate in Europe and the "West" in general about the point of this new discipline, unfortunately principally seems to have resulted from the necessity of struggling with new phenomena, like for example the so-called *religious radicalism* among young European Muslims, or the so-called *integration* of Muslim communities in western societies, it seems to be high time to deal with Islamic-theological studies as real exigency. In other words, it is becoming more and more significant to know *how Islam presents itself and its own concept* of the world, and to not merely *discuss it* as an outside foreign body any longer.

Given this context, the present paper aims in particular to put the light on some brief reflections about the significance of *Islamic Theology* in the so-called *West* and the ability of this field of knowledge to act as a constructive alternative on the path to a peaceful and fructuous coexistence.

What does Islamic Theology imply?

Up to now, the discourse field "Islam" has mostly been looked upon as an outside "object" in the West and was more or less merely analysed descriptively. The Western perception of Islam and Muslims particularly in media is mostly under the influence of prejudices and "bad impressions", as explained by Gülevich (2004), who has put the light on "*moving beyond stereotypes*" (p. 93). In addition, the famous approach of *Said*[3] about orientalism demonstrated clearly the hidden sides of this historical fact. However, for a thorough and comprehensive understanding of its culture, its doctrine and the world view it offers, a new approach and new processes of analysing and understanding the so-called internal Islamic view about should logically be taken into consideration. In this context, we have the chance to advance towards the key concept of this work, only if we have the courage to approach the understanding of Islam and its concept of dialogue through the lens of *Islamic theology*. Apart from the discussion whether this term can be used within matters concerning Islam and/or reflect the characteristics of its religious and other various issues, I am totally convinced that relevant scientific and academic studies will be of great importance during the next years and decades, in particular in respect of the German and European context.

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[3] "When Edward Said's "Orientalism" was first published in 1978 it drew heavy attention and controversy due to its attack on not only the ground assumptions of the academic field of oriental studies, but on the whole manner in which East and West are portrayed. Said's Orientalism deals with the Western structuring of the orient as "other". Said analyses central Western texts in order to account for the way the conception of The East was crystallized. This conception, according to Said, prepared the ground for the political and cultural occupation of the non-Western regions by the West.", See [Great summary of Orientalism by Edward Said", http://culturalstudiesnow.blogspot.com/2017/09/great-summary-of-orientalism-by-edward.html]

The term *Islamic* theology, that has recently began to be adopted in western academic frameworks, provoked many discussions concerning its linguistic legitimacy and conceptual accuracy. Due to the particularly Christian connotation related to this expression, the definition of such a discipline, when viewed from an Islamic perspective, requires more efforts of explanation. In fact, the Islamic term for this discipline *al-ʿulūm ash-sharʿīyah* is comprised of two elements: The first being *ʿulūm sciences/disciplines* and the second *sharʿīyah* that is related to the famous and often used, also even misused, notion of *sharʿīʿah*, primarily meaning *the path to the water hole*[4] (Adamec, 2000, p. 284), as is the case in Q. 5/48. Observed from an Islamic-theological perspective, the derived term *sharʿ* is therefore used to designate *the path to the source* i.e. to *God*, which for its part means in Islamic-theological understanding *the laws and rules* determined by God for the believers. In this context, and as emphasised by the Muslim Thinker Ghannouchi (1993), the majority of modern Muslim scholars agree with the view considering the implementation of the interests of the whole of humanity as the main aim of *sharī'a* (p. 30). As pointed by the Swiss Muslim reformer Ramadan[5] (2004), and according to the classical definition of Muslim scholars, *"To seek the good is one the fundamentals of sharīʿah part and so is a part of it."* (p. 38). Muslim theologians define this discipline as one of the most basic, yet fundamental, subject areas of Islamic religious knowledge, that addresses the study of the laws, rules and regulations defined by God himself. Based on this understanding, this discipline rules over all the issues that result from the relation of God with man: revelation, prophets, divine law, creed and many other different points of interest in the life of a human being. Although some people argue that the term denotes Christian implications, I think the adoption of this term in the modern academic terminology is certainly possible and thoroughly legitimate. In this respect, the following statement made by the Kenyan Christian scholars Ntedika & Kenny (2010) provides us with a very interesting approach:

> *It seems sometimes strange or even inadequate to talk about a subject such as "Islamic Theology" particularly in a Christian environment because there is a traditional presumption that theology is Christian. But if theology (Greek word Which means "study of God) could be defined as the study of God not only as*

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[4] In contrast to the misuse of this word today, Classical Muslim scholars did have a positive perception of it by understanding it essentially as *way*, not as usually misunderstood, as penal law.

[5] One of the most famous modern European Muslim scholar, who deals with modern Islamic issues, in particular inter- and intra-faith dialogue.

he is in himself but also as he is in relation to all created beings; if theology is a systematic discourse on revealed truth; if theology comprises all human efforts to understand and explain the nature of the relations between God and man, why should we not talk about Jew theology or Islamic theology? (...)

Dialogue as a basic Islamic virtue

Qurʾānic conception of Dialogue

Before we start dealing with the issue from an Islamic-theological perspective, it seems important to try to explain what this term exactly means regarding the essay at hand. Indeed, the definition of "dialogue", which primarily indicates a conversation between two parties, is – on the one hand – also suitable for this context, but – on the other hand – not extensive enough to encompass the inner-Islamic significance. Therefore, I consider it necessary to specify from the beginning that both meanings together constitute only a part of my general conception of *dialogue*. In other words, this term goes considerably beyond the borders of a simple conversation to a more general semantic field including various (or in fact every imaginable) kind of *communication, discourse, interaction or relation.*

Concerning the Qurʾān, the concept of dialogue occupies a considerable part of its content, appearing in different forms oftentimes characterising its style but also its content and discourse. One of the most extensive works that offers an extensive analyse of this phenomenon is in my judgement the meritorious work of Kulucan & Erol (2011),[6] who dedicated a separate chapter in order to go into all dialogical dimensions in the Qurʾānic discourse. (p. 28-66). On the lexical level, two typical terms in particular can be asserted: *ḥiwār* and *jidāl*. The former, which literally means *conversation*, can be stated in three Qurʾān ic verses Q.18/34, Q. 18/37 and Q. 58/1. The latter term that is mostly translated as dispute or argumentative discussion is a dominating expression that is ascertainable 29 times in various Qurʾān ic contexts. However, even an entire Qurʾān ic Chapter that reports the conversation between the prophet Muḥammad and a woman who was *pleading her husband*. This chapter entitled *al-mujādilah* (The pleading woman) or *al-mujādalah*[7] is devoted to the

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[6] The book mentioned here, entitled "Dialogue in Islam" is a very significant work for the essential issue of "Islam and dialogue" and can be used as reference to understand the ideas suggested in the paper in hand.

[7] The title of this *surah* can be read in the two different ways, as explained above. In fact, the Qurʾānic text is characterised by its flexibility by encompassing different possibilities of the so-called *readings* that represent a significant Qurʾānic discipline named *qirāʾāt*. However, it is important to call attention to the fact that these

concept of dialogue, which –in my humble opinion– represents the most salient example to demonstrate the significance and virtue of dialogue in Islam.

The beginning of the Qurʾān already puts a light on the importance of communication and interaction between God and Man. This hypothesis relies on two noticeable arguments related to the two following examples:

Example 1:

Al-Fātiḥah, (The Opening) the initial chapter of the *Holy Book* represents an initial clue to the significance of dialogue between God and man. This Chapter, which possible names – according to classic Muslim scholars – are multiple[8], inherently involves distinct characteristics of a certain sort of conversation. According to a so-called *hadith qudsi* "*holy saying*"*,* which refers in Islamic tradition to divine words (God´s own words) that are reported by the prophet to his community, God says:

I have divided *the prayer* (alternative titling of the first Chapter of the Qurʾān) between me and my servant (…): one-half remains for me and the other is for him, and my servant shall receive what he has asked (me). If the servant says: "Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds", so God, the sublime, responds: "My servant praised me", and if the servant says: "The most Merciful, the most Clement" , so God, the sublime, replies: "My servant praised me", and if the servant says: "King of the most recent day", God replies: "My servant venerated me", if the servant says: "We worship You and ask You for help", God says: "This remains between me and my servant and he shall receive what he has asked me."

By observing the essential role of this *sūrah within* the daily ritual practice of every active Muslim who recites it in his five daily prayers 17 times a day and in many more situations and ceremonies - we can understand the significance of the necessary continuous dialogue between God and Man. From a modern Islamic perspective, it appears arguable to consider an amplified modern interpretation of the *opening* of the Holy Book of Islam by interpreting it also as an appeal to enter into a universal dialogue. In fact, God presents himself as *Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds*, comprising, among other creatures, the entire human race. The collective voice that

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readings mostly bring diversity and complementary meaning, not contradiction. This diversity is another evidence for the openness and richness of meanings characterising the holy book of Islam and de facto Islam in general.

[8] There are many other names of the first Chapter, mostly known as *al-Fātiḥah* (the opening, the preface), as for example *umm al-kitāb* (the opening of the Book), *as-sabʾ al-maṯānī* (the seven repeated verses) referring to Q. 15/87, or *aṣ-ṣalāh* (the prayer) the holy saying mentioned here.

appears in Q. 1/4, also underlines the unity and interaction of people asking God to *show them the straight path*. Accordingly, and seen from a modern Islamic-theological perspective, this could also mean that this collective dialogue must have one single main target, which is *to be find the right way*, or what we also call *the truth*, and consequently to be open, objective and tolerant towards the "others".

Example 2: The first revelation Q. 96/1-5

Furthermore, the very first Qurʾānic message that was initially revealed to the Prophet can also be considered as an additional evidence for this statement. In fact, the verses Q. 96/1-5, which are supposed to be the first ever-revealed passage, also underline the importance of dialogue that marks the encounter of the Prophet Mohammed with his Lord.

1. Proclaim! (or read!) in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created- 2. Created man, out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood: 3. Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful,- 4. He Who taught (the use of) the pen, 5. Taught man that which he knew not.

In addition, the very first Qurʾānic message that was initially revealed to the Prophet can also be considered as an additional evidence for this statement. In fact, the verses Q. 96/1-5, which are supposed to be the first ever-revealed passage, also underline the importance of dialogue that marks the encounter of the Prophet Mohammed with his Lord.

God´s Dialog with Prophets

Among many Qurʾānic stories where God enters into dialogue with His prophets, the episodes that deal with prophet *Mūsa* certainly stand out. God's prophet *Moses* (Q. 4/164) is even addressed through direct divine speech.

I consider two further stories concerning Abraham *Ibrāhīm* and Jesus *ʿĪsa* as additional storming examples describing significant dimensions of a dialogue experience with God Himself:

In Q. 2/260 Abraham wants to know how God gives Life to the dead in order to satisfy his own understanding. Although this request is usually not suitable for a prophet who is supposed to be a transmitter of the divine message calling to the only Creator – God nonetheless is prepared to hear what Abraham feels and thinks and so He fulfils his wish by showing him how he brings dead birds back to life.

Let us now deal with the second striking dialogic moral lesson that we find in 5/116, reporting a dialogue between God and Jesus about the claim of trinity:

And behold! Allāh will say: "O Jesus the son of Mary! Didst thou say unto men, worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of Allāh?" He will say: "Glory to Thee! Never could I say what I had no right (to say). Had I said such a thing, thou wouldst indeed have known it. Thou knowest what is in my heart, Thou I know not what is in Thine. For Thou knowest in full all that is hidden.

The special feature of this dialogue consists –in my humble judgment– of two main aspects. Firstly, God asked Jesus about a very important issue in terms of belief, as if he had not previously known his answer. This is a further indication of the clemency, communicability and flexibility that are necessary factors for a successful and fructuous dialogue. Secondly, this conversation provides us with an additional important moral lesson concerning how to cope with rumours from an Islamic perspective. Here God insists to give Jesus the chance to defend his position and He does not condemn him on the basis of what an external person or outside party may have claimed.

Dialog between God and satan

The conversation between God and satan in the following Qurʾānic excerpt gives clear evidence for the value of dialogue in Islam generally speaking and in the Qurʾān in particular. What we witness here is not an ordinary conversation, but rather a conspicuous event: God, the absolute symbol of Good, speaks with satan, the opposed absolute symbol of evil. By permitting satan, though him being disobedient, to dispute him and even to reject His orders, God teaches a great lesson of His modesty and objectivity towards humankind to those who are implicitly appealed to enter into a dialogue even with their opponents. Q. 38/75-85

75. ((Allāh)) said: "O Iblis! What prevents thee from prostrating thyself to one whom I have created with my hands? Art thou haughty? Or art thou one of the high (and mighty) ones?" 76. (Iblis) said: "I am better than he: thou createdst me from fire, and him thou createdst from clay." 77. ((Allāh)) said: "Then get thee out from here: for thou art rejected, accursed." 78. "And My curse shall be on thee till the Day of Judgment." 79. (Iblis) said: "O my Lord! Give me then respite till the Day the (dead) are raised. " 80. ((Allāh)) said: "Respite then is granted thee- 81. "Till the Day of the Time Appointed." 82. (Iblis) said: "Then, by Thy power, I will put them all in the wrong," -83. "Except Thy Servants amongst them, sincere and purified (by Thy Grace)." 84. ((Allāh)) said: "Then it is just and fitting- and I say what is just and

fitting-85. "That I will certainly fill Hell with thee and those that follow thee, - everyone. "

God´s Dialogue with Man through the prophet Muḥammad

17. Do they not look at the Camels, how they are made?-18. And at the Sky, how it is raised high?-19. And at the Mountains, how they are fixed firm?-20. And at the Earth, how it is spread out? 21. Therefore do thou give admonition, for thou art one to admonish. 22. Thou art not one to manage (men's) affairs. **(Q. 39/9-15)**

In addition to several indications about direct divine discourse, there are many other Qur˙ānic verses enhancing yet another dimension of dialogue between God and man. This kind of discourse is particularly characterised by rhetorical questions or other stylistic means. This kind of interrogation is alluding people to deep reflection, like in the example of: "*Don´t you see?!! Perhaps you will understand!*" *Q. 43/51*, "*Do they not then earnestly seek to understand the Qur'an, or are their hearts locked up by them?*" *Q. 43/03*, "*Say: Produce your proof if ye are truthful.*" *Q. 47/24*

Based on a global understanding of Qur˙ān, we can consider that these indications point to a continuous interaction between the divine message and its recipients.

The prophet in Dialogue with his community

Studying the biography of the prophet Muḥammad, one can easily notice the significance of dialogue as a basic instrument of the prophetic mission. The daily conversations between the messenger and his community constituted an important pedagogical and didactical means. He taught his companions moral-, ethical-, social-, economical- as well as political lessons without giving them the impression that he is a teacher reading a lecture. Thus the prophet took into consideration a sort of interactive dialogue, which nowadays is viewed as a modern pedagogical concept.

In this regard, I have chosen two examples –amongst uncountable additional traditions – that emphasize two different aspects of the prophetic dialogue:

For instance, the prophet used to ask his companions a question to hear their answers, only to surprise them with a different and unexpected statement. This helped them to keep basic knowledge in memory. Within several sayings of this kind, the dialogue helps recipients to distinguish two linguistic levels: *the superficial or initial primary meaning* and *the metaphoric secondary meaning* of a word or an expression.

The Prophet in Dialogue with his opponents

Despite the strongly negative attitude of his opponents and their rude behaviour towards him, his message or his community, Muḥammad was prepared –as his biography clearly demonstrates– to enter into several forms of dialogue with his adversaries on the basis of the divine instruction given to him in Q. 16/125: "*Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious.*" Q. 3/159.

As one can see, this verse obviously emphasizes two main qualities characterising dialogue in Islam. On the one hand, wisdom, which is one of the basic Qurʾānic concepts, as Yahya (2000) explains: "Wisdom, as is referred in Qurʾān is tenet experienced in the soul. In more than one verse, there is an explicit reference to ´the hearts that learn wisdom´." On the other hand the Qurʾānic message puts particular the light on the way of dialoguing with others and that has to be based *goodly exhortation*. The end of this verse resumes in certain way the main instruction given by God to his prophet - and certainly to all the Muslims today - which is to argue with other in the best possible way considering of course all imaginable values of a civilised and objective dialogue.

In this context, the conversation between the Prophet and one of his opponents, called *'Utbah ibn Rabī'ah*, concerning a suggested deal/proposal from the leaders of the tribe of *Quraish* for Muḥammad to stop his call to Islam in exchange for getting all what he wants in terms of material goods or/and political power. (see for example Ling, 2000, p. 89). This dialogue shows moral rules concerning the Islamic way concerning how to behave to dialogue partners, listen to them carefully and answer their questions in respectful, sincere and polite way, even if they do not respect these values.

The prophet in dialogue with angels

It was narrated on the authority of Umar (may Allāh be pleased with him), who said: While we were one day sitting with the Messenger of Allāh (peace be upon him), there appeared before us a man dressed in extremely white clothes and with very black hair. No traces of journeying were visible on him, and none of us knew him. He sat down close by the Prophet (peace be upon him), rested his knee against his thighs, and said, "O Muḥammad! Inform me about Islam. "The Messenger of Allāh (peace be upon him) said, "Islam is that you should testify that there is no deity except Allāh and that Muḥammad is His Messenger, that you should perform *salāh* (ritual prayers), pay the

zakāh (charity), fast during Ramadan, and perform Hajj (pilgrimage) to the House, if you are able to do so. "The man said, "You have spoken truly." We were astonished at his questioning him (the Messenger) and telling him that he was right, but he went on to say, "Inform me about *imān.* "He (the Messenger of Allāh) answered, "It is that you believe in Allāh and His angels and His Books and His Messengers and in the Last Day, and in *qadar* (fate), both in its good and in its evil aspects." He said, "You have spoken truly." Then he (the man) said, "Inform me about *iḥsān.*(goodness) " He (the Messenger of Allāh) answered, "It is that you should serve Allāh as though you could see Him, for though you cannot see Him yet (know that) He sees you."He said, "Inform me about the Hour." He (the Messenger of Allāh) said, "About that, the one questioned knows no more than the questioner. So he said, "Well, inform me about the signs thereof." He said, "They are: That a slave-girl shall give birth to hir mistress; that you will see the barefooted naked, destitute, the herdsmen of the sheep competing in their bulidings", Thereupon the man left (the gathering). I waited a while, and then he (the Messenger of Allāh) said, "O Umar, do you know who that questioner was?" I replied, "Allāh and His Messenger know better." He said," That was Jibril (the Angel Gabriel). He came to teach you your religion.""[9]

The Muslim scholar Diwan (2012) comments the importance of this hadith that comes in form of a dialogue. It represents a pivotally important mission of Archangel Gabriel during the latter days of the prophet, to explain once and for all the basics of Islam to the new community of believers:

> This very famous hadith alone contains all outwardly actions and inwardly beliefs of a Muslim. The sciences of the Sharīʿah frequently come back on this hadith due to its encompassing knowledge of the whole of the Sunnah. Hence, some of the scholars have termed this hadith the Mother or "Core of the Sunnah", just as Surah al-Fatiha has been termed the Mother or "Core of the Qurʾān", due to it containing the entire Message of the Qur'an.

Islamic Theology as a chance for Dialog

Responses to destructive phenomena

As it is common knowledge today, one of the most widely discussed challenges of our time is related to radical and extremist tendencies, and destructive ideologies, that are causing an

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[9] This Hadith and an English commentary (partly cites above) can be found in *matn al-arbaʿīn an-nawawīyah*, see for example http://40hadithnawawi.com/index.php/the-hadiths/hadith-2 (29.04.2016)

enormous damage to the cohesion of society and to world peace in general. Analysing this phenomena in the most objective way as possible, we should be able to recognize that a lot of diverse political, social, cultural and/or religious factors or even all of the above could be behind their appearance and evolution in modern human societies. In respect to the radical views connected to Islam, I think that the modern debate in this regard has to be aware of two basic dangerous phenomena that seem to go hand in hand: the so-called Islamic Radicalism but also at the same time the so-called Islamophobia, which we actually could also term as anti-Islamic Radicalism. Now let us return to the questions, whether and in what manners Islamic Theology has the ability and the assertive momentum to contribute in facing these disturbing and defiant phenomena.

Islamic Theology as an alternative against Islamic characterised radicalism

It is a well-known fact that some radical groups of today refer to *Islam* when justifying their unacceptable and ugly acts of aggression and terror. In this context, and based on the material we have analysed up to now, I am personally convinced, that Islamic theology can offer efficient means to face such prosecution. In fact, Muslim theologians around the world agree with this statement. In a very consistent way, Amirpur (2010), an Islam expert from Germany, explained the potentials of this discipline in terms of facing the challenges caused by a destructive and aggressive vision of extremists. In this regard, I want to cite two significant examples:

The main Islamic-theological disciplines offer a vast spectrum of entry points to prove that Islam is indeed inherently a religion of peace. First, and based on the knowledge obtained from *Qurʾānic sciences*,[10] modern studies of this kind not only are fit to help understanding what *Armstrong* (2001) calls *The True Peaceful Face of Islam*, but also gives suitable responses to the opponents of this concept that draw from the very same source, namely the Qur'ān , to legitimize their claims. Moreover, other basic branches of Islamic sources, such as the tradition of the prophet Mohammed that involves his sayings, his behaviour and reports in his biography *sīrah*. This body of text, mostly called *sunnah*, offers more than enough evidence that can easily be used to refute the arguments of radical views. Islamic law called *fiqh* is also a decisive means to face radical claims by demonstrating, for example, the value of a human being´s live and the true Islamic position on the killing of innocent people. Finally yet importantly, the doctrine of *Islamic Creed* called *ʿaqīdah* can potentially also play a pivotal role in the process of understanding the deep insights of Islam and also the role of people of other faiths.

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[10] For detailed information about this term, see for example the work of Usmani cited in the bibliography.

The second impressive example that, in my opinion, represents a practical contribution to this challenge is a recently published open letter of 120 notable contemporary Muslim scholars to the leader of the terrorist organisation called IS. In this particular letter, they demonstrate in a breath-taking way that Islam strongly condemns the entire false claims extremists make. This example can be an inspiring blueprint to participate in this long process of reconstructing the true image of Islam for the future. This initiative can certainly act as a trendsetting role model especially to the coming generations of young Muslim theologians, and more so to those who live in non-Islamic societies.

Response to anti-Islamic Radicalism

At the same time, Islamic theology is an important pillar in respect to another very important issue that has been frequently discussed in the past years, namely the interpretation of some Qurˁānic verses and their respective connection to reality. In this context, I am sure that this new discipline Islamic Theology can also be regarded as a great means for efficient intellectual intervention in sensitive and delicate situations. An excellent example for this kind of contribution is the open letter called "A common Word", written in 2007 by 138 Muslim scholars addressing Pope Benedict 16th, whose citation about the prophet Mohammad in a lecture hold at the Regensburg University, on September 12th 2006 that had partially caused aggressive reactions of angry Muslims around the world. This letter, described by its signatories as *a first positive answer towards dialogue, which however has to become universal and more concrete*,[11] in my opinion represents a great and civilised alternative to resentments or even violence. This initiative led to a dialogue between both sides taking place in many countries,[12] as Germany.

There are similar cases, where anti-Muslim radical propaganda has been circulated in a high frequency until it became the norm - for example the anti-Muḥammad-caricature trend we have witnessed the past years - I still believe that Islamic theology can definitely play a very constructive role in terms of explaining the true values of Islam and the truth of the prophet Muḥammad and to provide the world´s public view with peacefully presented and convincing answers. At the same time, the crucial impact of Muslim scholars in terms of illuminating Muslim communities around the world about the real Islamic reasonable reaction in particular in conflict times furnishes clear evidence for the importance of this discipline for the world peace.

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[11] This comment can be found on the official website also named "A Common Word" (See bibliography) created by the Muslim scholars who wrote this letter with background information and statements.

[12] The Evangelic central office of Philosophies has published a whole issue concerning this letter and the reactions of evangelic scholars toward its content. (See *Eißler* in the Bibliography)

Initiation and promotion for or inter- and intra-faith Dialogue

Dealing with this term has turned more significant in the recent years. It certainly can be meaningful to know how ordinary people understand "dialogue". However, it is also necessary to examine the opinion of those protagonists who are directly involved in this kind of activities. *A Journey Together*, an Irish organisation presenting itself as *a resource for Christian-Muslim Dialogue*,[13] provides the following interesting definition:

> Interreligious dialogue, also referred to as interfaith dialogue, is about people of different faiths coming to a mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate with each other in spite of their differences. The term refers to cooperative and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions, (i.e. "faiths") at both the individual and institutional level. Each party remains true to their own beliefs while respecting the right of the other to practice their faith freely.

Once we refer to the different basic sources of Islamic Theology, we can easily find a noticeable number of indications about an open and pluralistic Islamic view towards other religions. The Qurʾān considers diversity as a divine law ruling nature and the creatures that live therein and in addition rules their very coexistence. That is why God appeals to mankind to be aware of the main reason of their creation, namely to know each other and enter in a peaceful dialogue based on mutual respect and interactive coexistence:

> O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allāh is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allāh has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). Q. 49/13

> Besides many Qurʾānic indications in this regard, the prophet Muḥammad taught this openness and peaceful contact to other religious communities to his community by himself entering in dialogue with the Jews and the Christians.[14]

On the other hand, I must confess - as a Muslim engaging in the promotion of dialogue and dealing with different issues of the modern Islamic reality - that Muslims also urgently need some initiative for reconstructing and establishing intra-Islamic peace. In fact,

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[13] See Bibliography (www.coistine.ie)

[14] An important example in this context can be found in the background story of Chapter 18 of the Quran. In fact, the reason of revelation told by Muslim scholars is a Dialogue between the messenger and Jewish authorities in Madinah, the capital of the first Islamic state. According to some Islamic resources, the Jews asked Mohammad three questions in order to test his knowledge as a prophet. The Chapter mentioned above revealed the three right answers.

one cannot oversee that deep divisions and grave conflicts mark the relationships of many Muslim groups today because of ethnic, religious, political, social or ideological differences. This phenomenon has already reached a dangerous summit and has occasionally taken even aggressive and bloody dimensions. From this perspective, Islamic Theology should also work as an important instrument to put some more light on clarifying *the Islamic ethical and humanitarian concepts* to the Muslims themselves. (Abu Sulayman, The Qur'anic Worldview, p. 17-21). In this context, Islamic Theology that is based on modern scientific and academic methods and at the same time has the potentiality to refer to the true issues of the Islamic world is undeniably one of the most promising alternatives.

The "German Model" of Islamic-theological studies

A brief background story

The question whether Islam is suitable for Germany and/or western societies has been occupying the experts, the media and even politics for some time now, but I think, this is the wrong - or at least not the primary - question that needs to be discussed in this regard. In my attitude, dealing with first question is in my attitude useless, if we compare it with ones that are more significant in this regard. Indeed, Islam is already an inseparable part of these societies because of the presence of millions of Muslims in Europe and the west since several decades now. Many generations of Muslim are born and have grown up in these societies and do sometimes even not know very much about their own Muslim heritage. Muslim communities within the western world, and particularly in Germany, have grown bigger and their hopes, fears, visons and questions are deeply rooted in the German society. Consequently, academic and social debates about concepts as *Socialisation*, *cultural integration*, *Islamic education for children in German context*, like for example in the Studies of Blaschke-Nacak, & E. Hößl (2016), are taking place every day, which has positive impact on the mutual understanding within the society. issues as and many other The coexistence between Muslims and others led to numerous public debates concerning open questions, such as political and social integration, religious identity and cultural diversity and plurality. However - and in contrast to what most people believe to know - this experience of coexistence is not a modern one, but had already begun within the first Islamic state in Madinah, Saudi-Arabia, where Muslim and Jewish tribes lived together, and formed what Ademac (2009) calls *the "first Judeo-Muslim Community."* (p. xIvi)

With respect to Germany, there are some at least between 4 and 5 Mi. Muslims from all around the Islamic World living in this country.[15] Because the Turkish Muslim emigrants were the first to come in the 1960s, Islam in Germany to this day clearly has a dominant Turkish impact. However, also other Muslim communities have enriched the Islamic scene in Germany during the course of last fifty years. Consequently, we have today people from all continents and all Islamic countries living in Germany.

The debate about Islam, the migration of Muslims and some additional factors finally led to the adoption of this discipline into the German educational system. Especially after some primary schools have implemented Islam courses in their curricula as pilot projects, the academic study programmes were then introduced by the German Ministry of Education and Research at the selected universities mentioned above. In the coming years, teachers for Islam in German schools, Imāms[16] for German mosques as well as Muslim theologians acting in different social and cultural fields will constitute the fruit of these degree programmes. Fuss (2010) commented the promising aspects of this historical event marking the establishment of this new discipline by highlighting, that *this decision will considerably shift the theological landscape within Germany and Europe. In due course, its impact on the academic approach towards Islam will be even felt in Muslim majority countries. The well-funded German institutions will certainly attract international attention, and become an important venue for Muslim Theologians throughout the world* […].

Organisation

Up to now, five faculties or institutes for Islamic Theology have been established: In the universities of Muenster, Osnabrueck, Frankfurt, Tubingen and Erlangen-Nuremberg, covering different German federal states. To begin with Tubingen, where the very first *Center for Islamic Theology[17]* was founded in October 2011, numerous and certainly promising signals can be ascertained. For example the steady increase of the numbers of applying students, the different aspects of local and international academic research and cooperation and particularly the role played by the designated institutes in the recent years in respect of inter-faith dialogue and several other social fields.

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[15] This is an approximate statistic considering as well the increasing number of refugees from conflict areas in the Near East.

[16] Islamic term primarily meaning "the leader of ritual prayers". In Islamic Theology and History, it is taken to mean more Kinds of religious or intellectual "Leadership". In the Shiite doctrine, this term has a central significance for historical reasons.

[17] The Center, also known in Germany as *ZITh (Zentrum für Islamische Theologie)*, has chosen the Arabic name that is conforming to the Islamic concept of Islamic Theology: *Markaz al-ʿulūm asch-sharʿiyyah*.

Impressions and socio-cultural reception

Despite the ongoing debate about the role of German Islamic-theological institutions, a debate that can develop a quite harsh character particularly within the Zeitgeist of "Islamic-colored" radicalism, I personally can clearly see that the legitimacy of this project and its positive impacts on the German society can, in the meanwhile, already be seen. In a lecture in this regard, Fuss already in (2010) predicted the promising aspects of this historical event marking the establishment of this new discipline by highlighting, that: *this decision will considerably alter the theological landscape within Germany and Europe. Its impact on the academic approach towards Islam will be even felt in Muslim countries in due course. The well-funded German institutions will certainly attract international attention, and become an important meeting point for Muslim Theologians throughout the world (...)[18]* (p. 1).

In contrast to the approach of Strouma (2015) to the establishment of *Islamic Theology* in Germany, by which she speculates about grave academic and cultural consequences, claiming that this would mean to impose a Christian way of thinking upon the Islamic religious discipline, I - as a Muslim theologian myself - entirely disagree with this approach to the issue at hand. The statement of Ntedika & Kenny is a convincing answer to this position.[19] In this respect, it seems important to clarify the concept of Islamic-theological studies in the German context.

Conclusion

According to the Ideas suggested in this work, one can see that Islamic theology should now not only be a matter of the Islamic world alone, but also become an elementary necessity for both, modern western societies and the Muslims living there. The numerous modern issues and questions that are -justly or unjustly- related to Islam now have a new additional framework, wherein which they can be academically discussed. Considering this, I personally am convinced that both, Muslims and the non-Muslims alike, need not consider this discipline a threat against their convictions, but rather as a newly established "bridge" that can facilitate cultural and religious exchange.

Up to now, the discourse field "Islam" has mostly been looked upon as an outside "object" in the West and was more or less merely analysed descriptively. However, for a thorough and comprehensive understanding of its culture, its doctrine and the world view it

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[18] Fuss, has presented here some interesting points in his approach to this issue in a lecture entitled "Introducing Islamic Theology in German Universities". Nevertheless, some other points concerning the aims of this academic project can be a subject of controversial debates.

[19] See (p. 8)

offers, a new approach and new processes of analysing and understanding the so-called internal Islamic view about should logically be taken into consideration. In this context, we have the chance to advance towards the key concept of this work, only if we have the courage to approach the understanding of Islam and its concept of dialogue through the lens of *Islamic theology*. Apart from the discussion whether this term can be used within matters concerning Islam and/or reflect the characteristics of its religious and other various issues, I am totally convinced that relevant scientific and academic studies will be of great importance during the next years and decades, in particular in respect of the German and European context.

While considering the fact that Islamic theology studies, Qurˀānic disciplines, Islamic creed, the tradition of the prophet Muḥammad, Islamic law and other aspects of Islam, all of us - and particularly western scholars dealing with this religions - need to be aware of the differences between Islamic Theology and the Oriental Studies, also called "Islamic studies", "Islamology" etc. As we tried to explain in the introduction of this study, now I believe the time has come for Islam to "speak for itself" by presenting its own theological viewpoints and arguments and adding its perspective to the discourse. This is especially important after that several centuries of orientalist discourse –or rather monologue– have passed now "judging Islam". However, this approach was never meant to cut or end the cooperation and the exchange between these both disciplines, but rather to allow each one for his part, to play their own distinct role in the process. In other words, Islamic Theology can make it possible to trace "a more authentic" image of Islam and to eventually deliver a better understanding of its doctrine.

One of the basic aims of the dialogue of religions and cultures is undeniably a peaceful but also honorable coexistence of all human beings irrespective of their ethnic, religious or cultural differences. Dialogue activists should therefore not intend concurrence or dominance but rather cooperation and harmony. This notion of "Dialogue for coexistence" has become a separate dialogical concept of modern scholars, as explained by Al-Tuwaijri (1998) dealing with this important aspect of dialogue that gives it a human and universal dimension (p. 5-7).

As we have seen, all the here analyzed examples emphasize the virtue of dialogue in Islam and present clear and plain evidence for the openness, flexibility and morality of its approach. Unlike the doctrines of destructive ideologies adopted by radical tendencies both for and against Islam, the Islamic-Theological approach presents very significant proofs for the readiness of Islam to deal with the current issues in an authentically, moderate and reasoned fashion. Muslim theologians dealing with these issues therefore carry the potentiality to act as ideal antidote against harmful extremist ideas and radical claims.

By rediscovering the dialogue from an Islamic perspective, wide horizons of inter- and intra-faith dialogue can be opened. Considering the tension marking some historical periods in respect to the relationship between the western and the Islamic world, Islamic theology, also and primarily, needs to be understood as a means of dialogue and interaction. Moreover, this dialogue must be firmly founded on mutual respect, flexibility, cooperation and reciprocal trust. As the modern Muslim scholar Tariq Ramadan, who is one of the important experts in the field, sums it up: *"You go for a dialogue if you are confident, not scared."*[20] Accordingly, a quite specific definition of the interreligious exchange has to be an issue of reflection. The approach of Kurucan & Erol (2012) is giving arguable ideas in this regard:

> By intercultural or interfaith dialogue, we mean a conversation between different individuals or groups whose purpose is simply honest engagement and increased mutual understanding. This kind of dialogue can be distinguished from debate, where we seek to win an argument, to persuade others of our point of view. It is also different from discussion, which aims to solve a problem, reach a consensus or decide on a course of action. (p. 16)

To conclude, I believe that the Muslim world as well as the West is in need of a re-conception of their relationship. In fact, the two spheres must come to realize themselves as being in a *deep partnership* - not rivals or competitors - in terms of facing the contemporary challenges that affect both equally. That for me is one of the most meaningful lessons Islam has given to humanity using seemingly endless indications in this regard, as one can easily see in the following fabulous verse appealing all of us to *Share diversity*:

"O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other. Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of Allāh is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allāh has full Knowledge and is well acquainted." Q. 49/13

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[20] This is a statement made by Ramadan in a conversation on October, 12, 2015 about "Islam and Inter-Faith Dialogue", in a programme called "Islamic Awakening" in "PRESS TV". (See Bibliography for web link)

Technical notes

The English Qur'ān translation used in this paper refers mostly to the Indian Muslim scholar Yusuf Ali, because his work is well known and used particularly in the English-speaking world. (Including as well technical details, for example as the use of small or capital letters) *The Holy Qur'ān.* (1934 1937): *Transaltion and Commentary*, Lahore. Saudi Revision: *The Holy Qur'ān: Transaltion of the meanings and Commentary.*

Concerning Arabic and Islamic-theological terms, there is no indication in the APA-norms about a definite transcription-system that has to be used in such academic context. That is why I used here the English Transcription for Arabic words, which is included in the "DMG" (German and European system being used in the most countries in Europe). This choice is related to the Islamic-theological character of the paper in hand. Thus, this may help our colleagues from other academic fields be familiar with the way Islamic and Arabic words are read or written in. In a few specific cases, and in order to facilitate the task of reading Islamic terms and concepts, we made little changes in the transcription.

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