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Naming God

A Muslim Response to the to the Spring 2013 McGinley Lecture

Professor Amir Hussain, Ph.D.

Al-salaamu alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatahu, peace be upon you and the Mercy and Blessings of God. I am honoured and delighted to be invited back to Fordham to offer a very brief response to the wonderful Spring McGinley lecture that we heard from Fr. Ryan. A very simple and a very sincere “Thank you” to all of you here. I need to single out, as always, Fr. President Joseph McShane for his hospitality, Provost Stephen Freedman for his support, Sr. Anne-Marie Kirmse for her help with the arrangements, James McCartin and Christine Hinze for their very kind introductions, Rabbi Polish for his wise words, and of course to Fr. Ryan for inviting me to respond to his lecture.

I really don't have much to add to Fr. Ryan's lecture, which will become apparent in the next few minutes. However, let me make a few observations. First, I suspect that Fr. Ryan knows much more about Judas Priest than he cares to let on, although I always pegged him as more of a fan of that other English Heavy Metal band, Motörhead.

In a more serious vein, I'm struck by his comments about special reverence for the name of Jesus among Christians, and the ways in which devout Muslims will add phrases of blessing (such as “may God bless them and give them peace”) after saying the name of **any** prophet, not just the Prophet

Muhammad (May God bless him and give him peace). When I moved from Toronto to Los Angeles in 1997, one of the first films I saw was Robert Duvall's little masterpiece, *The Apostle*. That was his love song to Southern Pentecostal culture, and there is a marvellous scene where Duvall's character, the Rev. Eulis "Sonny" Dewey is preaching first in a Black church, and then in a tent revival to a Latino/a audience.¹ That scene echoes the "I Am" passages from the Gospel of John which Fr. Ryan spoke about. It also helped me to understand the power of the name of Jesus for Christians.

In thinking about that name, my third observation comes from my teacher, Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Over 50 years ago (1959) in a festschrift for one of **his** teachers, Philip Hitti, Wilfred wrote almost in passing (to the untrained eye, I hasten to add. To those of us who knew the master, he **never** did anything in passing): "This brings us on to another parallel which has long intrigued me. Provocative and far from fully congruent, certainly, it is one that it has seemed to me might tentatively be drawn in general between the Trinity in Christian thought and the 'ninety-nine names' of God in Islamic. The similarity is not so much in content as in the form of relationship. I once suggested such an analogy to a liberal Muslim, a scholar of literature with a London doctorate: the intensity of his shock and the swiftness of his repudiation were revealing, but, I felt, not convincing."²

Here, I think of one of those names that Fr. Ryan didn't mention in his talk, *Al-Haqq*, or The Real. But Fr. Ryan, of course, knows all about *Al-Haqq*, as that was key to the work of Louis Massignon, who Fr. Ryan wrote about in an

article entitled “The ‘Catholic Muslim’: The Conversion of Louis Massignon” for the January 25 issue of *Commonweal* magazine. William C. Chittick, who teaches down the road in Long Island at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, describes *Al-Haqq* in this way: “God is the Real; there is nothing real but the Real; everything other than God is unreal, ephemeral, transitory, illusory, vanishing, nothing. In short, every quality and characteristic of things that has a positive side to it derives from a divine quality and owes its existence to God. Everything good, praiseworthy, permanent, and real belongs to God. Therefore, ‘Praise belongs to God,’ and to no one else.”³

In making a connection here with Christian thought, I was reminded of the words of St. Paul. At weddings, one often hears the magisterial text of the 13th chapter of Paul’s first letter to Corinthians. In the chapter immediately preceding, Paul talks about spiritual gifts, how the Spirit of God is manifest in the world. I read the text now as I first read it, in the majesty of the King James Version. I know that other translations are more accurate, but other translations didn’t shape the English language the way the King James Version did. And I read this in my own way, not as a wedding text, but as a funerary text. To my reading, Paul is describing, in his own way, the experience of Al-Haqq, the Real:

1 Corinthians 13:1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

4 Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

5 Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;

6 Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;

7 Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

8 Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.

9 For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.

10 But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.

11 When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

12 For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

13 And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

A fourth observation is the gift of naming given by God to the first created human being. Fr. Ryan talked of the Jewish tradition, where the first human, *ha-*

'adam, is created from clay. In the Qur'an, God speaks to both creating the human being and then breathing into it to give it life:

When I have fashioned him and breathed into him of My spirit, then fall down to him in prostration. So the angels prostrated themselves, all of them together: except Iblis, he was proud and he was one of the unbelievers. God said: "O Iblis! what prevented you that you should prostrate yourself to him whom I created with My two hands? Are you proud or are you of the exalted ones?" (Quran 38:72-75).

This is one of several versions in the Qur'an where the story is told of the fall of Satan, or Iblis. In the second chapter of the Qur'an, we are given the Islamic version of the story in Genesis of Adam naming the animals:

And the Lord said to the angels: "I will create a vicegerent on earth." They said: "Will You place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood?—while we do celebrate Your praises and glorify Your holiness?" God said: "I know what you know not." And God taught Adam the names of all things; then God placed them before the angels, and said: "Tell me the names of these if you are right." They said, "Exalted are You; we have no knowledge except what You have taught us. Indeed, it is You who is the Knowing, the Wise." God said: "O Adam! Tell them their names." When he had told them, God said: "Did I not tell you that I know the secrets of heaven and earth, and I know what you reveal and what you conceal?" (Qur'an 2:30-33).

I see a connection here with the very first word of the revelation to Muhammad,

iqra, recite. It means to speak out loud or proclaim, but I see it in the tradition of Adam, to name.

My final observation is on the gender nuances that Fr. Ryan calls us to. In the Qur'an, God's love for creation is often called *rahma*, mercy or compassion. Etymologically, as Fr. Ryan reminds us, *rahma* comes from *rahim*, or "womb." The word's basic sense is a mother's sheltering love for her children. A number of sayings of the Prophet make the connection between God's mercy and a mother's love. For example, "Surely God is more merciful toward God's servant than any mother toward her child."⁴ We need to be mindful, I think, of the Mercy of God, and the feminine imagery in which God's Mercy is expressed.

NOTES

¹ This scene can be found on

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oSmYRKBcgTM>.

² Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “Some Similarities and Some Differences Between Christianity and Islām,” in *On Understanding Islam: Selected Studies*, ed. Jacques Waardenburg (The Hague: Mouton, 1981), 243.

³ Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1994), 61.

⁴ William C. Chittick, “The Role of Love in the Qur’anic Worldview,” unpublished essay, 16.