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KEITH AL-HASANI

THE QUR'AN AND THE
NAME-OF-THE-FATHER

The subject I would like to focus on today is one that strikes me as being of great interest to many people in different fields, in particular to psychoanalysts and theologians.¹ The subject of discussion: the Name of the Father and Abraham, or more broadly, the figure of the Father in monotheism. My intention is to further explore the questions that arise over ownership of the Name, the Name-of-the-Father, together with issues and complications that have haunted monotheistic communities for several thousand years. Up until now, the Name-of-the-Father in psychoanalysis has mostly been dealt with from the perspective of the Old and New Testaments, and I hope to extend and hence further complicate the topic by examining Abraham in the Qur'an, with open honesty, without trying to conceal the problematic scriptural verses that induce anxiety in us all. Of course, one must be careful about how one speaks of Abraham, of the Abrahamic, without oneself being the subject of sacrifice, especially in these rather bloody times. Is it possible to speak of Abraham's dysfunctional family without oneself being run-through? So, the Name will be introduced in a fresh way, but in the process I will also need to mention Jesus, Muhammad, the Qur'an and Islam, a word that means submission, all within the monotheistic landscape.

The eruption of virulent Islam forces me not so much to trace the concrete political developments that have led to these pathological interpretations of the Qur'an, where destructive political objectives have been supported by scriptural references and quotations, but instead to speak of it in more general terms. Of course, one cannot deny the complicity of global powers in creating many of the conditions that are conducive to contemporary religious fundamentalism, and we would be unwise to claim the cause of all the horror that we witness daily is due to religious differences alone, which is too simplistic, reductive, and naive. Other factors are present, such as the protection of foreign interests in the Middle East involving energy production and political control. At the same time, we need to admit that there are obstacles in the Arab world that need to be considered when dealing with scripture because of the intellectual conservatism that is manifest in this region. In Christianity as well, we see a pathological renewal of global evangelism. So even though Judaism,

¹ This was an oral presentation at the Lacan Circle of Melbourne Study Day, 2006.

Christianity and Islam are all variations of the same religion, these three communities continue to shed blood in the Name of the Father. Lacan said “the three religions of the Book are in perfect harmony; that is why their faithful try so hard—with blood, too often—to differentiate themselves.”² We’re now facing an even more threatening approach at resolving differences between faiths, a tragedy resulting from the widening gap between Muslim and Judeo-Christian countries, a reality that is part of everyday life. Tony Blair was reported to have said, “This war can’t be won in a conventional way, it can only be won by showing that our values are stronger, better and more just, more fair than the alternatives.” One cannot help but suppose he was referring to Muslims, who possess inferior values and hence need to be taught better ones; one way or another, either they or their values need to be eliminated. This reckless and world-domineering fantasy will no doubt result in many catastrophic consequences.

These three monotheisms were born of an event that each remembers as a seminal moment in history, the moment when God appeared to Abraham. The history of monotheism begins at this point, with Abraham’s covenant with God, although the appearance of Islam as a monotheistic religion will not occur until seven centuries after the birth of Christ. Whether called Elohim, God the Father or Allah, it is all the same deity. In the Qur’an, Jews, Christians and Muslims are referred to as the People of the Book. The Qur’an also refers to the Torah and to the Gospel of Jesus, which it considers sacred texts. Many people are astonished to learn that Islam is as much part of Abrahamic monotheism as Judaism and Christianity. However, there is a growing interest to learn about Islam, although much of this seems to be motivated by the desire to find clues about the causes of 9/11.

With all this in mind, we may now turn to the Qur’an and compare it with the writings of the Bible. I don’t plan to dwell too much on the lexical and syntactical aspects of the text, as this is out of my domain, nor will I talk about its history of canonization, but I will instead touch on some of the thematic aspects found in the Book. Giorgio Agamben once said that “the appearance of a new religion always coincides with a new revelation of language and a new religion means above all a new experience of language.”³ The Qur’an is in fact a series of messages in Arabic, the language of the people to whom Muhammad was speaking, that were revealed in installments and delivered by Muhammad over a period of twenty-two years. The Qur’an says, “We never sent a messenger but with the language of his people.” It then describes itself as an “Arabic proclamation.” Most Arabic words stem from roots that consist of three consonants. For example: *ktb*; *Kitab* (book), *kaatab* (writer), *maktaba* (library), *maktoob* (letter). Classical Arabic script had no indications of vowels during the course of “revelation.” These were introduced later, hence the

² Amadou Guis e and Alexandre Leupin, “Religion and Mathematics: An Interview with Jacques Lacan” <<http://www.alexandreleupin.com/publications/ReligionandMathematics.htm>> [accessed 23 May, 2009].

³ Giorgio Agamben, “Propos . . .” *Bulletin de l’Association freudienne* 2 (1983): 23, quoted in Gabriel Vahanian, “God and the Utopianism of Language,” in *Lacan and Theological Discourse*, ed. Edith Wyschogrod, David Crownfield, and Carl A. Raschke (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989) 119. References to the Qur’an are to Abdallah Yousuf Ali’s translation, Dar El-Fikr, Beirut

erroneous insertion of vowels may have completely changed the form of some words and therefore their meaning. The first word revealed to Muhammad by Gabriel was the word “*iqra*,” which means “read” or “recite,” and this resulted in the final monotheistic rupture in history. It was this simple command to “read” that led to the genesis of Muhammad’s mission.

The Qur’an is not historical like the Bible, beginning at Genesis and ending with an apocalypse. There is no linear organization of time, revelation and history. Chapters are not arranged in revelatory time but instead grouped according to their length. Also, each chapter title has little or nothing to do with its content. The final hour is not reached at the end, but can break out at any moment. This rejection of linearity involves a rejection of the historical narrative. Verses appear from nowhere, like dreams, continually destabilizing the message and its audience. Muhammad was perhaps the first to have systematically violated the rules of composition, opting instead to arrange chapters non-chronologically. The fact that classical rules of textual composition were ignored by Muhammad means that history played only a minor role in the ordering of both individual and society. This decentering aspect of the composition is also apparent in the very name of the text, for besides referring to itself as the Qur’an, which means reading, the scripture also refers to itself as the “*Furqan*,” from the Arabic root *frq*, which implies the idea of splitting and separating. So the message, one of differentiation, can be said to be the “essence” of the Book. Read (Qur’an) and Split (*Furqan*)! In fact, it is precisely the unevenness of the text that underscores the contingency of the revelations.

The Qur’an portrays humanity as a community existing in between prophecies and disasters, life and death. Its vision of human history is sombre and angst-ridden. Past civilizations are mirrored in the ruins they have left. The Qur’an says, “Man is created with a restless anxiety” (70: 19). It does not claim to be a book of history. In fact the Qur’an reduces the stories of the prophets to their minimum features, favoring the poetic over the narrative, rendering it difficult if not impossible to translate.

Muhammad placed himself firmly within the line of the Abrahamic prophets, but his relation to the paternal logic of Judaism and Christianity is of a different order. Slavoj Žižek states:

In contrast to both Judaism and Christianity, the two other religions of the Book, Islam excludes God from the domain of paternal logic. Allah is not a father, not even a symbolic one—God is one is neither born nor does he give birth to creatures. *There is no place for a Holy Family in Islam*. This is why Islam emphasizes so much the fact that Muhammad himself was an orphan. [. . .]. [This genealogical desert] renders [it] impossible to ground a community in the structures of parenthood or other bloodlinks. [. . .]. In contrast to Judaism and Islam, in which the sacrifice of the son is prevented at the last moment (angel intervenes to Abraham), *only Christianity opts for the actual sacrifice (killing) of the son*. This is why, although Islam recognizes the Bible as a sacred text, it has to deny this fact: in Islam, Jesus did not really die on the Cross. [. . .]. There is effectively in Islam a consistent anti-sacrificial

logic. [. . .] Abraham's decision to kill his son is read not as the ultimate indication of his willingness to do God's will, but as a consequence of Abraham's *wrong interpretation* of his dream.⁴

We read in the Qur'an, "Muhammad is not the father of any man among you" (33: 40). An unfavorable statement in another verse, "That which you worship apart from Him, is nothing but names you have named, yourself and your Fathers" (12: 40). Most of the Arabs, when hearing this, turned immediately against Muhammad and his disregard for the names revered by the Arab tribes.

Many of the key stories and roles we find in the Bible also appear in the Qur'an, but are most often recited Qur'an, enough to create holes in the Symbolic register of the Meccans. Although the Qur'an accepts Jesus' prophethood and refers to him as the Word of God and the Spirit of God, it rejects his divinity. In answer to God, in the Qur'an, Jesus explicitly denies any responsibility for advocating the Trinity, considered by Muhammad an aberration and a departure from the monotheism of Abraham. The Qur'an then states, "They do blaspheme who say God is one of three in a Trinity, for there is no god except one God" (5: 73). It also rejects the idea that Jesus died on the cross. The story now begins to resemble *The DaVinci Code!*

Muhammad kept emphasizing that Islam was nothing other than the religion of Abraham. In Chapter 2, verses 130-36, the Qur'an says,

Who turns away from the religion of Abraham except he whose soul is foolish. Where were you witnesses when death appeared to Jacob, when he said to his sons: "What will you worship after me?" They said, "We will worship your God, the God of your fathers Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac, and only one God. We submit to him." Say: We believe in God, what was revealed to us, what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, the tribes, what was given to Moses and Jesus, what was given to the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them. We submit to Him.

As a result of his radical return to Abraham, and by constantly undermining all previous traditions, whether Arab paganism, monotheistic Judaism or Christianity, Muhammad became an instant outcast and was forced to leave Mecca and seek refuge in another city called Medina, which is where he was buried. He was labeled a witch, a madman and a heretic by most of the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula. But he saw himself as a restorer of monotheism, which he felt was in a state of decay, and for this reason he felt his movement needed to be differentiated from other monotheisms. Hence the word "Islam" was coined, Mohammed's neologism.

The biggest gulf between the Bible and the Qur'an comes in the story of Jesus and Abraham. In the Qur'an, Abraham's struggle begins with the negation of polytheism. In chapter 19, verse 41 we read:

Mention, in the book, Abraham. He was truthful, a prophet. When he said to his father: "My father, why do you worship that which does not hear, does

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, "A Glance into the Archives of Islam," <<http://www.lacan.com/bibliographyzi.htm>> [accessed May 23, 2009].

not see, and cannot enrich you with anything?" . . . He [his father] said: "Do you disdain the gods, Abraham? If you do not stop I will stone you. Get away from me for a long time."

Abraham is the only monotheist revered by all three religions as Father. However, the message of the sacrifice of Abraham's son in the Qur'an is strikingly different from what is depicted in the Bible. While the two books tell the same story, there are some significant differences: the Bible says that Abraham took his younger son, Isaac, to be sacrificed. The Qur'an does not mention the son by name, instead leaving it concealed. The majority of Muslims believe that it was Ishmael. Let's read both scriptures and see what other differences can be observed. In Genesis, verses 22:1-13:

Some time later God tested Abraham; he called to him, "Abraham!" And Abraham answered, "Yes, here I am." "Take your son," God said, "your only son, Isaac, whom you love so much, and go to the land of Moriah. There on a mountain that I will show you, offer him as a sacrifice to me." Early the next morning Abraham cut some wood for the sacrifice, loaded his donkey, and took Isaac and two servants with him. [. . .]. As they walked along together, Isaac said "Father!" He answered, "Yes, my son?" Isaac asked, "I see that you have the coals and the wood, but where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide one." [. . .]. When they came to the place which God had told him about, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son and placed him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he picked up the knife to kill him. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, "Abraham, Abraham!" He answered, "Yes, here I am." "Don't hurt the boy or do anything to him," he said. "Now I know that you fear God, because you have not kept back your only son from him." Abraham looked round and saw a ram caught in a bush by its horns. He went and got it and offered it as a burnt-offering instead of his son.

In contrast, in the Qur'an chapter 37, verses 101-113, we read :

He (Abraham) said: "My son, I have seen in my dream that I am to sacrifice you. What do you think?" He said: " My father, do what you are commanded. You will find me, God willing, to be one of the patient." When they both submitted to God, and he laid him on his forehead, We called out to him: "Abraham! You have fulfilled the vision. Like this We reward those who do good." "This was a clear trial." We redeemed him with a great sacrifice. And we preserved his history for subsequent generations. Peace be upon Abraham! Like this do we reward those who do good. He was one of our believing servants. We brought him the good news of Isaac, a prophet, one of the upright. We blessed him and Isaac."

Notice that the Qur'an never says that God told Abraham to kill his son. It tells us instead that Abraham had a dream in which he saw himself slaughtering his son. Abraham believed the dream and thought that the dream was from God, but the Qur'an never says that the dream was from God. It is as if God in the Qur'an intervened when Abraham failed to correctly interpret the source of the vision. When compared to the Bible, the Qur'an's narrative is light in detail. Details about the

journey up to the mountain with the cutting of the wood, loading the donkey, and Abraham holding a knife are absent. In the Qur'an, it is the message rather than the plot which is of significance. Furthermore, the Qur'anic story does not specify which son it was in the dream that Abraham was to sacrifice. The Qur'an is not interested in genealogy, although the prevailing view amongst Muslims is that Ishmael was the one to be sacrificed. However, Muslim theologians are divided over which son was intended in the Qur'anic rendition. It is the son's willingness to surrender to his father's dream that makes the story into an account of the son's faith more than Abraham's. Whichever scripture we refer to, we can say that both sons were close to being sacrificed. Even if in the Old Testament it was Isaac who was the sacrificial child, Ishmael, Isaac's half brother, is banished from the household and denied his birthright, leaving him deprived of a father, a brother, and even his mother, who is referred to as a slave girl. Hence, Ishmael was sacrificed from Biblical history. By Genesis 22, Isaac is indeed Abraham's only son. In the Qur'an, the wives of Abraham, Hagar and Sara, are both absent, as is jealousy and rivalry between them. The Qur'an does not discriminate between Abraham's two sons based on their mothers. In the Old Testament, a distinction is made between the children of Isaac and the "inferior" descendants of Ishmael. In Genesis 16, God says to Hagar, Ishmael's mother, "You are going to have a son, and you will name him Ishmael. But your son will live like a wild donkey; he will be against everyone, and everyone will be against him." Furthermore, the Qur'anic story presents Abraham's son(s), the tragic hero of the story, as wishing his own death. We need to keep in mind that Muhammad was himself a descendant of Ishmael, born into the house of Hashem, meaning The Name. Claiming itself as universal monotheism, Muhammad delivered this verse from the Qur'an to his followers, which is also his moment of severance from the Judeo-Christian community: "Abraham was not a Jew nor yet a Christian; but he was true in faith, and surrendered his will to God, and he joined no gods with God" (3: 67). Somewhat like Saint Paul, Muhammad concluded that God chooses his people on the grounds of commitment rather than lineage. In Galatians, Paul says, "there is no such thing as Jew nor Greek-slave or free, man or woman" (Gal 3: 28). For Muhammad as well as for St Paul, all genealogical claims to faith were void. As a result, the Arabs immediately lost their tribal privileges, and the Jewish and Christian communities were disenfranchised.

We could compare Muhammad's return to Abraham to Lacan's return to Freud. The Freudian model of ego-id-superego was replaced with the Real, Symbolic and the Imaginary. Lacan rewrites the Saussurean sign, turning the formula on its head. His claim to be an heir to Freud results in his expulsion from the IPA. The world's most innovative and radical Freudian is "excommunicated." Muhammad's relationship with the Biblical Name-of-the-Father, results in the emergence of a radical representation of monotheism and this Name, a Name that is obsessed with the specter of polytheism, going so far as even to reject the affirmation of the Trinity, and yet denying the privilege of God as Father.