Provocation and Resonance: Sacramental Spirituality in the Context of Islam

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In this contribution, I wish to present and explore two complementary motifs which I believe can be useful in describing the encounter between Christians and Muslims at the level of spiritual experience: respectively, ‘provocation’ and ‘resonance’. The former is descriptive of the dynamic of interaction, the second indicative of the potential for dialogue, between the two. I shall argue that a case for ‘provocation’ as part of Christian-Muslim encounter can be made through revisiting our primary paradigm of relationship with the religious other, that of the Christian-Jewish reality; and I shall then use the example of a Catholic sacramental spirituality in contact with Islam to give one instance of what such provocation might look like. I shall then claim that, despite the apparent aridity of the theme of the sacramental for most Muslims, it is in fact possible to discern dimensions of Islamic experience which resonate with sacramental spirituality. The two parts of my argument are linked in that if a renewed sense of the importance of the sacramental can be one of the consequences for Christians of the provocation of Islam, then it must be incumbent upon us to ask, to what extent this sense of the sacramental can in turn be seen to resonate with an Islamic spirituality. I trust that this attempt to trace some links, however fragmentary, between a sacramental spirituality and an encounter with Islam will seem not out of place in a tribute to the achievement of David Thomas, who has combined throughout his life a rigorous academic exploration of Christian-Muslim relations with a faithful priestly ministry.

Provocation (1): From Isaiah to Paul

I take the theme of provocatio from Louis Massignon, of whom more below. The word has a depth of meaning in English. In contemporary usage, ‘provoked’ has a generally negative, somewhat insulting, connotation: ‘invite to anger’. However, it still retains traces of an older, broader meaning: ‘to call forth, summon, invite’. In Shakespeare’s Tempest, for example, Miranda’s father Prospero
tells her the tale of her early years, when, before they landed on the enchanted island where she has grown up, they were at the mercy of their enemies. She asks her father: ‘Wherefore did they not then destroy us?’, and he replies: ‘Well demanded, wench: my tale provokes that question.’

The word here conveys a sense of stimulation into an appropriate response, laced with some measure of being shocked, triggered into an action which might not otherwise have happened. Miranda’s question opens a new horizon in Prospero’s narrative of self-understanding. ‘Provocation’ is thus a little different from ‘competition’, although there are points of similarity. ‘Competition’ between two communities, or two teams, means being spurred by the example of the other to do the same thing as them, but in a more forceful and effective way. In distinction from this, ‘provocation’, while likewise triggered by the example of the other, elicits from one’s own community that which is a distinctive expression of its identity and values, which might not have been brought forth at all, or not in the same way, but for the catalytic role of the provocateur. Such is the linguistic reference of ‘provocation’; but where can we find a theological basis for this idea? I shall argue that the Bible presents us with the starting point for a positive theological sense of provocation, through tracing a trajectory which begins in the Old Testament account of Israel’s relationship with God, and then is developed in a significantly new direction with the advent of the New Testament and the issues that raises in relationship to Israel’s covenanted relationship with God.

The human encounter with God, charged by the divine jealousy which demands a whole-hearted and exclusive commitment, has within it a potential for massive and destructive malfunction when the relationship is violated or ignored by God’s people. One of the ways in which the Bible describes this malfunction is through the language of ‘provocation’. A key passage exemplifying this is to be found in Isaiah 65, where God complains as follows about those who will not enter into a dialogue of salvation with him:

I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, ‘Here I am, here I am’, to a nation that did not call on my name. I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people [el-ʿam sōrēr; LXX pros laon apeithounta kai antilegonta],