
This book review aims at briefly appreciating and criticizing Pim Valkenberg’s book from a Muslim perspective. As is known, some Muslims have deep suspicion about interfaith-dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims. Their doubts usually emerge from ignorance of the content and style of dialogue. If they would have sufficient knowledge about the relevant activity, they probably would not see any problem.

In my opinion Valkenberg’s book can give a general positive picture to those who have negative suspicion about the themes of interfaith-dialogue. Let me here indicate some of them.

Valkenberg departs firstly from hospitality which is a common value between the Abrahamic religions. According to him the main aim of dialogue is to revive Abrahamic hospitality, at least between Muslims, Christians and Jews. He stresses this aim in a passage saying that ‘my experience with several small beginnings of intra- and inter-religious dialogue has taught me that we, European Christians, have a lot to learn from the foreigners who are our interlocutors in this dialogue. As far as I am concerned, the most important thing to be learned is hospitality’ (p. XIV).

In the following chapters he deals with the context and meaning of dialogue, the forms of dialogue and the history of dialogue. In the meanwhile he gives importance to the issue of multiple belonging, referring to the ideas of many Christian scholars and theologians. But his stress on common prayer and fasting as a multiple religious belonging is very excellent and effective. In Valkenberg’s view Muslims and Christians have two common rituals: prayer and fasting. Unfortunately the fasting has lost its original religious significance within Christian society. In fact the fasting had a similar role in the Catholic tradition, like the Muslim one, but in the latter half of the 20th century its role has diverted to a form of social activism. In recent times, however, both Muslims and Christians have become aware of the importance of the respective traditions concerning Lent and Ramadan in inter-religious dialogue. In this process the role of Pope John Paul II was important. He has remarked many times how much he admires Muslim fidelity to prayer and fasting. At the same time he has organized days of prayer with Muslims, in addition he asked Christians to pray and fast on December 14, 2001 in solidarity with Muslim practice during Ramadan (p. 149-150).

Another phenomenon by which multiple religious belonging can be possible according to Valkenberg, is emulating in the Good Deeds. This emulating emerges from a verse of the Qur’an (5,48). Valkenberg is of the opinion that Muslims are able to make better sense of religious plurality than Christians. Because he considered the relevant verse of the Qur’an, which relates religious plurality to the will of God, to be more convincing than the reflections in *Dominus Iesus* on this subject matter. This verse also leads Valkenberg to regard the Qur’an, at least at one point, as a revelation of God. He raises the question whether it is possible, for a Christian theologian, to belong in a certain sense to the Muslim tradition, while remaining in his or her primary identity a Christian. He thinks that it is possible (p. 151).
In chapter 7 he analyses Christians and Muslims theologians who share lights. Some of these are Thomas Aquinas, Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058-1111), Muhyi-ud-din ibn al-Arabi (1165-1240), Maulana Jalal-ud-din Rumi (1207-1273).

Related to al-Ghazali he devoted a number of pages to al-Munqidh and al-Ihya, but he has referred to only one sentence of his Raddu’l Jamiel, although it was a very significant source concerning the dialogue. Actually, Al-Ghazali has shown us the way of dialogue in avoiding discussing the authenticity of the New Testament, but he largely focused on the methodology of its interpretation. Al-Ghazali has shown a flexibility towards some concepts of the New Testament, which usually would not be shared by other Muslim scholars. Al-Ghazali has argued that Jesus’ usage of some special metaphoric terms for God, such as ‘Father’ and towards himself as ‘God’, ‘Son’ and ‘Lord’ is lawful and acceptable. Every prophet has the right to use some special metaphorical concepts to explain the will of God. But, at the same time, God can forbid these for other believers, for example using these words was forbidden for Muslims.1

Valkenberg also deals with the ideas of Said Nursi (1878-1960) related to the dialogue. I must note here that Valkenberg mentioned the ideas of Said Nursi and gives a quite detailed exposure to the Dutch readers. But it is not enough, it has to be supported by some further studies. At the same time his study has some deficiency about Nursi’s idea concerning the dialogue. First of all Valkenberg starts to analyze Nursi’s idea with the Damascus Sermon, a sermon Nursi gave in the Damascus Umayyad Mosque in 1911. He published the text in Istanbul in 1912. In addition to this sermon Nursi explored the possibility of multicultural and multi-religious social life in his famous book, Munazarat (Discussion).2 In order to attain a complete analysis of Nursi’s idea about dialogue it is necessary to refer also to this publication. Let me draw attention to some ideas of Nursi related to dialogue, referring to the Munazarat.

Related to social relations between Muslims and non-Muslims Nursi firstly draws attention to the style and attitude of Muslims towards non-Muslim people. This style and attitude has to be respectful. Therefore Muslims must not call Christians and Jews unbelievers, since this saying contains negativity. Although using this term might be theologically possible, it is socially inappropriate. According to Nursi we have to distinguish between our theological and social style of genre. The use of theological language is valid in the religious field, but not in public. Language used in public has to be social.3 In fact, Nursi’s idea of developing respectful relations between Muslims, Christian and Jews is similar to the idea of Hans Küng. Hans Küng says that we shouldn’t consider each other as ‘unbelievers’, ‘renegades’ or ‘backward peoples’, but as ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’, or at least cousins, under the one and same God.4

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3 Nursi, 71-72.