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Don't Curse the Darkness, Light a Candle. The Challenge of Islam within the Cultural Diversity of Europe

Bernhard Reitsma

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Artikel beleuchtet, wie die christliche Kirche in Europa der Herausforderung der Präsenz von Muslimen in Europa begegnen soll. Er vertritt die grundlegende Ansicht, dass dieser Herausforderung im Licht einer theologischen Reflexion über die Offenbarung Gottes in Jesus Christus zu begegnen ist, wie sie die Heiligen Schrift offenbart. Reitsma zeigt auf, dass der Islam – wie das Christentum – vielschichtig und bei weitem nicht statisch ist. Gott beabsichtigte, dass die christliche Gemeinschaft das nach seinem Ebenbild geschaffene Volk darstellt als wiederhergestellte Schöpfungsgemeinschaft

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RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur aborde ici la question de la manière dont l'Église chrétienne se doit de réagir face à la présence musulmane en Europe. C'est fondamentalement à la lumière d'une réflexion théologique sur la révélation de Dieu en Jésus-Christ, telle que révélée dans l'Écriture, qu'il convient d'aborder cette question. Il souligne que l'islam – tout comme le christianisme –, présente une grande diversité et est loin d'être statique. Dieu a voulu que la communauté chrétienne soit le peuple créé à son image, la communauté restaurée de la création et le vice-roi du Créateur. Il soutient que la diversité culturelle (et

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SUMMARY

This article considers how the Christian Church in Europe should respond to the challenge of the presence of Muslims in Europe. The basic stance is that this challenge should be addressed in the light of theological reflection on God's revelation in Jesus

and Mitregenten des Schöpfers. Der Artikel argumentiert, dass kulturelle (und religiöse) Vielfalt schöpferisch bedingt und als solches eine gute Sache ist. Islam und Christentum haben unterschiedliche Wahrheitsansprüche, denn obgleich der Islam als eine abrahamitische Religion angesehen werden kann, können doch seine ganz unterschiedlichen Standpunkte hinsichtlich der Natur Gottes und der Erlösung nicht ignoriert werden. Nichtsdestoweniger sind Christen dazu berufen, Muslimen die Liebe Gottes anstatt Hass entgegenzubringen. Durch die Gnade Christi und die Kraft des Heiligen Geistes ist es möglich, als eine multikulturelle und multiethnische Gesellschaft in Frieden und Harmonie zu leben.

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religieuse) fait partie de la création et constitue à ce titre une bonne chose. L'islam et le christianisme se revendiquent de la vérité de manières différentes, car bien que l'islam puisse être reconnu comme une religion abrahamique, on ne peut ignorer ses perspectives fondamentalement différentes sur la nature de Dieu et sur la nature du salut. Les chrétiens sont cependant appelés à manifester l'amour de Dieu aux musulmans, plutôt que de l'animosité. Sous la grâce apportée par Christ et par la puissance de l'Esprit, il est possible de vivre en paix et en harmonie au sein d'une société multiculturelle et pluriethnique.

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Christ as revealed in the Scriptures. Reitsma points out that Islam – like Christianity – is very diverse and far from static. God intended the Christian community as the people created in his image, the restored community of creation and the viceroy of the creator. It is argued that cultural (and religious) diversity are given with the creation and as such a good thing.

The truth claims of Islam and Christianity are different, because even though Islam can be recognised as an Abrahamic religion, its fundamental differences in outlook concerning the nature of God and of salvation cannot be ignored. Yet Christians are called to

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1. Introduction

At a closed meeting in July 2018 the Dutch foreign secretary Stef Blok stated that he was not aware of any multi-ethnic or multicultural society, where the indigenous population is still present, which knows peaceful coexistence.¹ In this way he more or less suggested that it is impossible to integrate new cultures into existing cultural societies. Whether Blok thought this is the fault of the newcomers, who are not used to democracy and have not yet risen to the developed level of civilization in the West, or simply a matter of fact in any situation of newcomers blending into an existing society, was not clear from his speech. It could e.g. also be true for Westerners trying to integrate into a non-western society. He mainly pointed to different non-Western societies where things are in turmoil, warning that integration of migrants in the Netherlands will never be successful. The foreign secretary added that it is probably genetically determined that people do not go along very well with 'the other', with someone who is different from 'us'.

In response to fierce criticism of his position, Blok later apologised for the way he had formulated his thoughts, as not being wise and respectful enough. Still, he never really apologised for the content of what he said. Whether Blok just tried to be factual or not, his ideas fitted the agenda of the anti-immigration movement in Europe. For many people in Europe, what Blok said echoed their concern over the influx of refugees and immigration. One critic of the multicultural society tweeted in response to the upheaval: 'This government always seems to apologise when it is speaking the truth, but not when it is lying.'²

During the 2019 election campaign for the Dutch Senate, this situation was somehow confirmed by the rise of the alt right political party Forum for Democracy. This party, led by Thierry Baudet, is warning against the eradication of Dutch culture through – what they call – homeopathic dilution by immigration.³ On the evening of his victory in these elections, Baudet emphasised that we stand an hour before midnight, literally, 'in

show Muslims the love of God rather than hatred. Under the grace of Christ and through the power of the Spirit it is possible to live in peace and harmony as a multicultural and multi-ethnic society.

the midst of the ruins of what once was the greatest and most beautiful civilisation that the world has ever known. A civilisation that spanned all corners of the world, that was full of confidence.' In his view, this destruction of Western culture is the result of its undermining by universities, journalists, architects and politicians, and it is related to the perceived mass immigration of people from cultures that are completely different from the Dutch culture.⁴

Although neither Blok nor Baudet mentioned Islam in their speeches, the majority of immigrants to the West is perceived to be Islamic. And the concern among the constituency of Blok and Baudet, and of other right-wing political parties, is specifically related to the presence of Islam in Europe. A substantial part of the Christian community shares this fear that Islam is not able to integrate into the western democratic society; it is even considered a threat to it. The influx of more immigrants will certainly lead to less freedom and democracy and more terrorism. In this respect Christians often point to religious persecution in 'Islamic countries', to the lack of rights for women and minorities and to the nature of the Shari'a, or Islamic law.

Here I will not go into a detailed discussion if Blok is right or not. There are many examples of multicultural societies living in harmony, and Dutch society itself overall is not doing badly when it comes to the integration of people with different backgrounds. At the same time there is some truth in what Blok says, but I think we cannot simply blame that on culture only, not even on a perceived clash of civilisations. People are always inclined to divide the world in us and them.

Elias and Scotson have shown that even monocultural societies do not by themselves produce integrated communities.⁵ In the sixties of the last century they studied a suburban area in central England, where two groups of people were segregated. This situation could not be attributed to culture or background, because both groups were practically identical in terms of demography and social class. They were all white, working class,

with the same income and world view / religion. The difference was that one group had been in the area much longer than the other. Therefore one group was the established and the others always remained the outsiders and never really integrated. Elias and Scotson thus showed that the problem of integration goes much deeper than culture or religion. It has to do with group formation, which in turn is related to self-preservation:

Confronted with the difficulties of a highly mobile and quickly changing world one is apt to seek refuge in the image of a social order which never changes and projects it to a past that never was.⁶

The point that people groups do not always get along well is, biblically spoken, primarily related to the problem of sin and evil in the world, which expresses itself – among other things – in antagonism. In that sense it is part of our human DNA, it is part of our fallen human nature. Even so, the questions are fair. Is it possible to integrate Muslims with a non-European religion into our society? What would be the consequences?

I will gladly leave the answer to this question to the social and political scientists. They have the expertise to figure out how we establish safe and diverse societies which have room for everyone. They can work on the integration of diverse people groups in multicultural and multireligious societies. Of course the Church can make a very specific contribution, since it is an 'expert' in understanding the role and meaning of religion. My main concern as a Christian theologian is therefore how the Christian community should respond to the presence of Islam today. What is the challenge of Islam for the Church within the cultural diversity of Europe?⁷ This challenge can only be addressed in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. This means that we need to do much more than simply quoting texts from the Bible, usually out of context, and more than repeat dogmatic truths about the Trinity and the atonement. This challenge is calling the Church to a thorough re-reading and re-studying of the Scriptures in relation to the presence of Islam. What I can present here is just a sketch of what is involved in this process and of the outcome of it.

Four questions need to be answered if we want to define the challenge of Islam for Christians in the cultural diversity of Europe today: 1. What is the Muslim reality? 2. What is the European Christian identity? 3. What is a Christian view of

cultural (and religious) diversity? and 4. What is the Christian response to the challenge of Islam in the cultural diversity of Europe?

2. What is the Muslim reality?

If we want to understand the calling of the Church in relation to Islam, the first challenge is to get to know Islam and the Muslim communities. There is a tendency in every community, and no less in the Christian Church, to think in terms of *us and them*, in which the other is almost always being stereotyped.

Islam does not exist as one monolithic entity and therefore we cannot speak of the challenge of the one and only Islam. Colin Chapman emphasizes that Islam is not an abstraction; we are not talking about a set of beliefs and practices, but rather about more than two billion people from a wide variety of countries, cultures, languages, who have certain significant things in common.⁸ The Christian declaration 'Grace and Truth' confirms this:

The Islamic world contains significant theological and ideological diversity. ... We need a view of Muslims that is as accurate and discerning as possible, so we want to view them from a number of perspectives.⁹

There are quite some differences between, for example, classical Sunni Islam, Shi'a Islam, Sufi Islam or Salafi and Jihadist Islam. Classical Sunni Islam follows (one of) the four schools of law and the rules of interpretation laid down by the scholars (Ulama). Shi'a Islam currently identifies at least one Shi'a law school, while Salafi Islam only acknowledges the first glorious century of Islam as formative (and normative) for true Islam, and therefore does not acknowledge later interpretation, including the opinion of the scholars and the law schools. And these examples can be multiplied.

An example of what this means in practice is the – slightly simplified – traditional Sunni view of the house/abode of Islam versus the house/abode of war. Classical Sunni jurisprudence distinguishes between the Dar al-Islam, the territory under control of Islam, on the one hand, and the Dar al-Harb, the territory that needs to be won for Islam, on the other. In Shi'a Islam, however, the Dar al-Islam is distinguished from the Dar al-Iman, which in Sunni Islam is identical. The Dar al-Iman – or the house/abode of faith – is the world of Shi'a Islam, the world of the true believers, and

the Dar al-Islam is the entire Islamic world which does not accept the rule of the Shi'a Imams (the Sunni world). The rest of the world is Dar al-Kufr; the house/abode of unbelief.¹⁰

Tariq Ramadan argues that, in his opinion, in Sunni Islam the distinction is no longer valid and does not apply to modern society. When Muslims are allowed to profess their religion and celebrate their religious festivals/feasts, then they are living in the land of peace. According to him, the opposition of the abode/house of war and the house/abode of Islam is no longer applicable.¹¹ However, within Islam debates over this issue and many others are ongoing.

This example simply shows that Islam is very diverse and knows many different interpretations and views. Christian theology needs to be aware of and open to the fact that different Muslims may very well present their religion to us in very different ways. Nonetheless, in different ways they all rely on and interpret the same sources: The Qur'an, the example of the prophet Muhammad (Sunna) and the interpretation of the Islamic Scholars. Dan Brown emphasizes that the 'Islamic feminists and the Taliban' both belong to the phenomenon of Islam,

for although they are diametrically opposed in their conclusions, they make use of a common vocabulary and reference a common heritage. Similarly the Muslim pacifist and the suicide bomber, the Nizārī 'assassin' and the Sunni religious scholar who condemns him, are responding, albeit in very different ways, to a shared tradition. Indeed, they are contending for control of that tradition.¹²

The diversity in Islam means two things for those who want to interpret Islam in Christian Theology. First it means that we must always consider the context in which we are working. The context in Europe is completely different from the situation in, e.g., Saudi Arabia or areas dominated by ISIS or Boko Haram. Indonesia cannot be compared to Egypt. We should never confuse these contexts in any way because it would lead to irreparable accidents.

Secondly, we need to distinguish a religious studies perspective from a Christian theological interpretation. Confusing these two would do injustice to both Muslims and to Christian interpretation. Both tasks are complicated. It is not easy to really understand the complexity of Islam but it is likewise not simple to develop a Christian theological

interpretation of Islam. The latter requires a thorough process of reading and re-reading, interpreting and re-interpreting the Scriptures. We cannot simply quote passages or repeat dogmatic truths, usually about the Trinity and the atonement. We need to ask ourselves constantly: How do we interpret the Scriptures in relation to a religion that is post-Bible and post-Christian? Which scriptural passages do we choose? Are these passages really speaking about similar issues as the presence of Islam today? Can we compare the contexts of these texts with our current situations? And if so, what do they teach us and how do we apply these texts today? How do we do justice to both the biblical texts and Islam today?

Just one example will suffice to illustrate this problem. The history of Elijah and the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18 seems to speak about the worship of other gods and would – in the mind of some Christians – apply to the situation of Islam. Muslims worship a different God than Christians and the prophet of Islam is therefore a false prophet.¹³ However, on close reading there are a number of difficulties with this interpretation. Elijah is not speaking to gentiles who worship a different God, but he is speaking to his own people, the Israelites. Moreover, he is pleading with his people to stop worshipping Baal besides, not instead of, YHWH. They did not stop worshipping YHWH, but they worshipped Baal as well, breaking not only the first but also the second commandment. Elijah calls his people back to the true worship of the one God, away from polytheism and idol worship. If we want to apply this to Islam, we would have to acknowledge two things. First, Muslims need to be seen as part of the people of God, even though they are disobedient to God's covenant, otherwise this text does not apply to them. Secondly, in the light of this text Mohammad could also be compared to Elijah, for his intention was to get his people to worship only one God instead of many gods. Both interpretations are complicated and do not seem to do justice to the story in 1 Kings. For this reason the best approach is to acknowledge that the story of Elijah and Baal cannot so easily be compared to the situation of Islam today. Things are a little bit more complicated. The same can be said of many passages in the Bible.

3. What is the European Christian identity?

When we want to understand the Christian response to Islam, we need to understand the Christian identity. Who are we? In this respect European Christianity has to face its history as Christendom. As heirs of Western Christendom we need to deal with, sort out and handle a history of arrogance. There is a tendency within (Western) Christianity to see itself as superior to Islam. When discussing Islam in church meetings, I am very often asked if I do not see how evil Islam is. 'Can't you see that Islam is violent and that Christianity is not?' 'Can't you see what Muslims are doing to Christians, in Iraq, in Iran, in Nigeria, in Egypt ...?'

The persecution of Christians by Muslims is an important reality which we cannot deny or downplay. In seven of the top-ten countries on the Open Doors World Watch list, Islam is the majority religion.¹⁴ Still the truth is that in history until today Christianity – or maybe better: Christendom – has used exactly the same means to fight Islam and to convert Muslims as Muslims have done to contest/engage with Christianity. Christians have engaged in forced conversions, in which Muslims were given the choice between being baptised, being killed or having to move away (forced migration). Christians have used bribery, conquering lands, taking children from their parents and placing them in Christian homes, abuse and holy wars. In many parts of the Islamic world Christians are still seen as rich imperialists and colonists, people who are still exploiting the poor and hardly have any religious principles. They are seen as individualistic, sexually immoral, drinking excessive amounts of alcohol. From a Muslim perspective, Christians have double moral standards in the conflict in the Middle East concerning the State of Israel, democracy and other issues. And Christians are considered hypocritical in their criticism of Islam and Islamic violence, for in their own Scriptures we encounter the same laws and principles which they so vehemently attack in Islam. The Bible calls for stoning in case of adultery and in the case of apostasy, it encourages holy wars and it permits genocide.

So the main question is: What is the true identity of Christianity? What does it mean when in Christian theology Jesus Christ is considered the centre of Christian identity? What does Christianity look like when it lives from that centre and shows the real Christ to the Islamic world?

In my book *Vulnerable Love* I am describing the Christian community as the restored community of creation.¹⁵ In the beginning God intended humankind to be a community of people to relate to. Humankind was created in God's image, to live for him and work with him in caring for creation. Humankind as the viceroy of the creator. By rejecting this role and not accepting God's supremacy in all things, this community of creation was distorted. The relationship between God and human, between human and human, and between humankind and creation was broken. The whole creation was 'subjected to futility' and is in 'bondage to corruption' (Rom 8:20, 21). In Christ, however, God has restored his creation, so that 'if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation' (2 Cor 5:17). The Church is supposed to be the restoration of God's original intentions with humankind, a new creation-community. This is where we have to start when we consider the Christian identity in relation to Islam. And this is what the Church is called to reflect: the new life of creation as the restoration of God's original intentions with the world and with humankind.

4. What is a Christian view of cultural (and religious) diversity?

In order to understand the call of the Church in relation to Islam in the cultural diversity of Europe we need to understand the reality of (religious) diversity in the light of the Scriptures.¹⁶ Diversity in itself is a given reality. People differ in all sorts of ways, ethnically, historically, politically, religiously, in gender or sexual orientation, etc. The deeper issue here is inclusiveness. Does diversity imply polarisation or even enmity between different groups, or is it possible to include all kinds of different people despite their differences? The answer to this question immediately affects the relationship between Christians and Muslims. Therefore some – admittedly brief – reflections on diversity in the light of Scripture might help us to find a response.¹⁷

First of all, let us recognise that cultural diversity is God-given. It belongs to God's good creation. It is the consequence of the great diversity of creation. God created every human being in his image, and the diversity of God's own nature is reflected in the diversity of creation: male, female, different ethnic groups, different colours and languages.¹⁸ If one thing is clear from Genesis, it is that, although God started with one man and one woman, the

creation had the potential for many nations and people groups. God intended a creation that would worship him in many different ways; he created a community of love (Gen 2:4). The richness of cultures is part of the vision that God had from the beginning.

But is this also true of religious diversity? If we can define religion as a human effort to relate to the one God, then in a certain way religious diversity is an aspect of it. People can express their longing for God as the meaning of life in very different, culturally adapted ways. But this is not the whole story.

Secondly, diversity has also become a curse. When people rejected God and wanted to make a name for themselves in order to be strong and not dispersed over the face of the earth (Gen 11:4), God punished them with exactly that. He confused their language and they were dispersed over the face of the earth. Diversity in language was the beginning of diversity in culture and custom. This is a painful sign of the distortion of creation, which has been present since the beginning of creation (Gen 3). When humankind broke away from God to live autonomously, the whole creation broke down and the God-created diversity became a curse. This is true not just for the diversity in language, but also for all other kinds of diversity. Absolutising one's own culture, for example, easily leads to racism, xenophobia, discrimination, exclusion and worse.

Diversity also has become a curse in the diversity of religion as the expression of one's relationship with God. Religion can be twisted to accomplish the opposite of what it was meant for, namely the worship of the one true God. When humans start to define God in their own terms, for their own benefit, to make a name for themselves or to avoid worshipping God on his terms, then religion has replaced God. It can even become a way of resisting God. That is why Karl Barth criticises religion as 'Unglaube', unbelief.¹⁹ Even though religion can be seen as a search, a zeal for the one true God, apart from Christ it becomes unbelief. It is religion that misses the mark; it is without understanding of God's true nature and work in Christ (Rom 10:3).

Thirdly and finally, in Christ diversity is redeemed. On Patmos John is allowed a glimpse of what will happen in the future, when Christ will return and restore his creation. He sees

a great multitude, that no one could number,

from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!' (Rev 7:9–10).

With this, God's original plan for his creation has been restored and diversity through the Spirit of God is released for the common praise of the one true God in Christ. If this is the vision, then we can conclude that the ultimate purpose of the Church is to exemplify this multicultural, multi-ethnic community today. Therefore the Christian community in Europe and elsewhere must resist the temptation to replace diversity with uniformity. Emphasising different cultural and ethnic traditions in the Church is a form of worshipping the colourful wisdom of the Creator. Turning non-Western migrants into Western secular citizens of Europe is not just a form of cultural patronising, a revival of the sin of colonialism, but it is also an insult to Christ, who did not give his life to destroy or overcome diversity, but to redeem it.²⁰

This viewpoint also implies that religious diversity is in some way redeemed in Christ, but that does not mean that every religion is confirmed in its own way of seeking God. On the contrary, only in relation to the Cross of Christ do we find God. So everything that tries to worship God in any other way than in Christ is judged in the light of the cross. It is called to acknowledge God in Christ as the creator and redeemer and to surrender every religious belief and form to him. Every religion, so far as it resists the full revelation of God in Christ, is called to repentance. This is also true for Christianity as a religion. The Christian community is also searched by God in Christ, to repent from all ideas and forms of belief that do not comply with God in Christ. The Christian identity can only be found in relation to the cross.

The true way of worshipping God in Christ displays a rich variety of thoughts, beliefs and rituals. The unimaginable wisdom of God cannot be expressed in a monolithic way of worship and belief. That leads us to the final part of the challenge.

5. What is the Christian response to the challenge of Islam in the cultural diversity of Europe?

5.1 Two conflicting positions

Very generally spoken, there are two major – radically opposed – approaches to Islam within the Christian community in Europe. Both are extreme and probably do not exist in pure form. Nevertheless, they can help us to distinguish more clearly what is at stake when we try to sketch a Christian response to Islam in the cultural diversity of Europe.²¹

The first approach views Islam simply as a different version of the same basic belief in the one God. In a pluralistic or syncretistic worldview, the idea is that all religions somehow sincerely try to connect with a divine or ultimate reality. Since both Christians and Muslims – together with the Jews – are children of Abraham, they both know God. Although what they believe and how they believe is not identical, in the end all monotheistic religions come down to the same basic values of love and care for people and creation. Muslims and Christians are reaching for the top of the same mountain, albeit along different routes; therefore Muslims and Christians in Europe are basically brothers and sisters and should work and live together for the same goals. Receiving (Muslim) immigrants and refugees is our duty as (religious) human beings, although it has to be done in a wise way.

The second approach sits at the other end of the spectrum. Islam is seen as the antichrist and as demonic. In this view Muhammad was misled (or according to some: inspired) by the devil and the Qur'an does not contain any revelation from God. Consequently, we can and should not side with Muslims in any way, not even for the common good of society. In the end, what Christianity and Islam aim for is completely different and the goals are totally opposite. Christianity and Islam are, to put it mildly, in competition for the souls of the people or, in a more antagonistic approach, at war with each other for world dominion. Therefore, we have to conquer or subdue Islam, either by evangelising Muslims or by colonising the Islamic world. For Europe this means that we have to limit, if not terminate, all Muslim immigration.

Both views do not really help since they are simplistic. They do not do justice to the reality of both Christianity and Islam, and their under-

standing of both is superficial and deceiving. Even though Islam is Abrahamic in origin, it does not mean that the fundamental differences concerning the nature of God and of salvation can simply be ignored and that their truth claims are irrelevant. The Christian faith and Islam are in conversation about the truth and they are both witnessing to their respective truths. This conversation is about the reality of God's presence amongst us, about the nature and character of God and about the way in which God is realising his purposes for creation. Islam and Christianity – although comparable in many ways – differ substantially on these issues. They part their ways on the Christian confession that God has revealed himself and has realised his ultimate purposes in Jesus Christ. They might even be considered to be climbing different mountains.

However, this conclusion does not mean that the two religions should consider each other enemies in the public realm and that there can be no way of cooperating for the common good. Both religions do acknowledge that the ultimate judgement on humankind is with God and not with us. And only with superficial knowledge of Islam (and Christianity) can it be claimed that all Muslims are potentially a threat to the stability in a democratic Europe or that all are striving to create Eurabia.²² Christians have often been tempted to fight and defeat Islam, as Muslims have fought Christianity. This would have been the biggest mistake of Christianity, for in doing so we would have completely distorted the gospel. The conversion of Constantine surely needs to be evaluated in the perspective of its own time, not only from our so-called enlightened position today. Nonetheless, the conclusion seems not unreasonable that this turn in history equals the fall of Christianity.²³ The connection of Christian faith with worldly power was a major sin of the Church. Therefore, if the Christian community today sees it as a priority to fight for western values of individualism, liberalism, democracy and freedom of speech and religion, we should wonder if this could not also lead to a problematic distortion of the Christian faith. Of course, the Christian values of the integrity of human life and of freedom and peace are worth pursuing. However, when we start to confuse the Kingdom of God with a Western worldview, it becomes problematic.

5.2 A Christian response

The Kingdom of Jesus cannot be identified with our Western values. It reflects the original inten-

tions of God with creation. Our Western lifestyle in a broken creation does not necessarily coincide with them. Therefore, Jesus confessed before Pilate, when he asked if Jesus was a king:

My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world (Jn 18:36, ESV).²⁴

The Kingdom of Christ is at odds with the kingdoms of this world. It is not like the Empire of Rome. The Kingdom of Christ cannot be advanced with power or armies and – consequently – cannot be defended with weapons. Otherwise Jesus would have had servants fighting to protect him. According to John, the covenant of God, his grace and truth (Hebrew *chesed wa'emet*), has come in Jesus Christ and all who believe in him have received the right to enter the Kingdom, to become children of God (Jn 1:12, ESV). It has to do with faith in Christ (Jn 3:16). Jesus continues his words in John 18 by professing that he was born and came into the world to bear witness to the truth. In other words, in him the (new) covenant has arrived. In Jesus God is returning as King to Israel and the world. This was promised by the prophets in the Old Testament and was what the Israelites in Jesus' days were expecting fervently.

This basic tenet of Christianity has implications for a Christian response to Islam. It reveals a principle that still has value today. First of all, if the Kingdom of God cannot be advanced or defended with weapons, if it is of a totally different nature than the kingdoms of this world, then this is also true in the face of Islam. The life of the Kingdom of Christ cannot be defended with weapons and it cannot be given to anyone by force. The Kingdom of Christ is the Kingdom of the King who died on the cross (Jn 19). It is characterised by self-sacrificial and unconditional love. It is not about territory, like the Roman Empire or the Israelite Kingdom which the Jewish zealots had in mind, but about conquering hearts and nations with the love of Christs. It is not a westernised Gospel that will convince people to enter the Kingdom of Christ, but the pure Gospel of God who was willing to give himself away in Christ and through the Spirit, in order to set all of his creation free from the destructive powers of sin and death.

This means that the new community of the Kingdom should first of all be qualified by unconditional, self-sacrificial love. The Church should

love Muslims as God loves them and receive them with open arms. That does not mean that we should accept and embrace evil, perpetrated by Muslims, extremists or not. God's unconditional love for humankind does not mean that he accepts injustice and evil. On the contrary, real evil can only be overcome by love. The power of sin can only be broken through the cross as a manifestation of that love. It means that the Christian love does not depend on the behaviour or quality of the object of love. It is love even for enemies, a love that forgives persecutors (Mt 5:44).

Secondly, the way the Kingdom does advance in love is through the witness to this truth. The new community of the Kingdom, all who do belong to Jesus, like him testify to the truth. The truth is the reality of the covenant of God, which is a blessing to all the nations. And that reality has been realised in Jesus Christ and in his work on the cross. He is the promised King, God himself, who has returned to Israel. He is the way, the truth and therefore the life.

The Christian community by its nature is a witness to the truth. In this community God's original purpose with creation is realised. This community lives in close relation with God and operates as his ambassador, is viceroy to the world. Witnessing to the truth is therefore more than merely evangelism, proclaiming the gospel with words; it is holistic mission. The Church is by its existence part of the mission of God and as such the instrument of that mission. It is living the life of the new community of creation, showing what it means to live in line with God's original intentions, embracing Muslims in love in order to speak the truth about the nature and character of Christ and his work. In a broken and evil world, it is a prophetic community which brings light and exposes darkness and evil.

6. Conclusion

In the light of what we have seen so far, we can define the calling of the Church in relation to Islam in the cultural diversity of Europe as being a witness to the unconditional and self-sacrificial love of Christ. In relation to Islam it means that the Christian community as the new creation community is meant to reflect to Muslims God's original purpose with them, as it has been realised in Jesus Christ. The existence of the Church in itself is already a testimony to what God intends for the whole world. The Church is a testimony of the

diversity of God's creation because the Christian community is a multicultural community. Part of her calling is to show that under the grace of Christ and through the power of the Spirit it is possible to live in peace and harmony as a multicultural and multi-ethnic society. The body of Christ is called to defy the conviction of foreign secretary Blok that such a society does not exist or is not possible. The love of Christ is meant for all cultures and all peoples, for every person God has created and brings to us, irrespective of their background and ethnicity. This love even reaches out to extremists and those who persecute Christians. That also implies that Christians can and should work for the common good of society, as far as it reflects the purposes of God. And they can do so together with all who want to promote goodness and peace in the world.

However, what does this mean in the light of evil in the world, in the face of extremist Islam which is pursuing a holy war on Christianity and the West? Are we not supposed to resist that evil? In this respect there is a distinction between the Christian community and the powers of the state. The Church is called to resist evil through love and prophetic witness, to call all powers to account and to proclaim the justice and righteousness of God. She is not called to restrain evil by force, but to witness to the truth and to shine light in the darkness. It is the role of the governing authorities to restrain evil and to exercise judgement on evildoers. But even when the government does not fulfil its God-given role, the calling of the Christian community remains the same: to witness to the truth in extravagant, unconditional, self-sacrificial love.

Living in this way is very vulnerable. It could lead to discrimination, humiliation and being ridiculed, it could even lead to suffering and persecution. This is part of being the new community in the world, which is not yet fully redeemed. We cannot be glorified with Christ if we are not willing to suffer with him in this world (Rom 8:17). But we can be assured that Christ has conquered the world and that 'the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us' (Rom 8:18, ESV).

Don't curse the darkness, light a candle.

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Endnotes

- 1 'Minister Stef Blok: "Suriname is een mislukte staat, door etnische opdeling"' at <https://www.bnnvara.nl/zembla/artikelen/minister-stef-blok-suriname-is-een-mislukte-door-etnische-opdeling> [accessed 15/11/2019].
- 2 Jan Roos on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/LavieJanRoos/status/1019550759174725633> 18/07/2018 [accessed 15/11/2019].
- 3 'Thierry Baudet over de "homeopatische verdunning" op Radio NPO 1, Sylvana Simons reageert' at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NhTCKoboOu0> [accessed 15/11/2019].
- 4 The Dutch text is 'Spreektekst Thierry Baudet, verkiezingsavond 20 maart 2019' at <https://www.trouw.nl/democratie/spreektekst-thierry-baudet-verkiezingsavond-20-maart-2019~ae2a1539/>; it can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qURoK7oEhTQ> [with English subtitles; accessed 15/11/2019].
- 5 Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders: A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems* (originally 1965; 2nd edn. London: Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: Sage, 1994).
- 6 Elias and Scotson, *Established and Outsiders*, 160.
- 7 This is the edited version of a paper given at the conference of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians in Prague, August 2018, on the theme of Christian Identity and Mission in a Divided Europe.
- 8 Colin Chapman, 'The Challenge of Islam', unpublished lecture given at the WEF on Cyprus (2000) 1.
- 9 Rick Love, 'Grace and Truth: Toward Christlike Relationships with Muslims: An exposition by a Global Network of Christians who love Muslims, including many who live and serve among them', *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 26.4 (2009) 191, 189.
- 10 Anthony McRoy, *From Rushdie to 7/7. The Radicalisation of Islam in Britain* (London: The Social Affairs Unit, 2006) 97-98, who refers to E. Kohlberg, 'The Development of the Imami Shi'i Doctrine of jihad', *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft* 126 (1976) 64-86, 69.
- 11 Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), orig. French: *Les Musulmans d'Occident et l'avenir de l'islam* (Paris: Sindbad / Arles: Actes Sud, 2003) chapter 3.
- 12 Daniel W. Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam* (3rd edn; New York: Wiley, 2017) 5.
- 13 See B.J.G. Reitsma, *Kwetsbare liefde. De Kerk, de islam en de aard van God* (Utrecht: KokBoekencentrum,

- 2016) 27–28. An English translation of this book will appear with Langham Publications, London.
- 14 'Open Doors Analytical' at <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/> (password freedom), sections World Watch List Documentation and Country Dossiers [accessed 21/11/2019].
- 15 Reitsma, *Kwestbare liefde*, 103–105.
- 16 Diversity is a very broad concept. It has to do with culture, gender, religion, sexual identity, ethnicity, etc.
- 17 Reitsma, *Kwestbare liefde*, 147–149, 153.
- 18 Even before the building of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11), when God cursed the people with different languages so they could no longer understand each other, people were already speaking different languages, see Genesis 10.
- 19 Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* Band I, 2 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1938) § 17, p. 327.
- 20 Brian M. Howell and Jenell William Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology. A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011) 42.
- 21 Cf. the overview of these positions in Reitsma, *Kwestbare liefde*, 18–22.
- 22 Term introduced by Bat Ye'or, *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab axis* (Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 2005).
- 23 Cf. Reitsma, *Kwestbare liefde*, 106. The term was introduced by G.J. Heering, *De zondeval van het Christendom. Een studie over Christendom, staat en oorlog* (Arnhem: Van Loghum Slaterus, 1928).
- 24 For an extensive interpretation of this passage, see Reitsma, *Kwestbare liefde*, 109–116.