How Can a Catholic Respond, in Faith, to the Faith of Muslims?

RAYMOND G. HELMICK
BOSTON COLLEGE
U.S.A.

This article, as an account of very personal Catholic experience of Islam, has a bit of history. I wrote the original, in February, 1999, for a Franciscan publication in Sarajevo, where it was published in Serbo-Croat translation. Twice in the previous year I had visited Bosnia and other countries of the former Yugoslavia, meeting many people of each national and ethnic community, and in fact I have seen much of them since. I wrote as a stranger who had followed their sufferings closely. In revising it slightly now, I understand how acute the question of Catholic relation to Muslims has become in the Philippines.

For many years I have worked closely with people in other conflict situations, such as Northern Ireland, the Israeli-Palestinian Middle East, Lebanon and others. Religious faith, in each of those conflicts, has had much to do with framing people's sense of their communal identity, much as, in the Balkans, Orthodox have understood themselves as Serb, Catholics as Croats, Bosnian Muslims as a distinctive people. I have often seen, and felt myself, the perplexity many of us feel at meeting people of another faith, wanting to respond to them respectfully and yet not knowing how to do it.

As one who for many years had been engaged in ecumenical efforts among Christians, it had been relatively easy for me to work with the Protestant/Catholic division in Northern Ireland, though I knew how difficult it was for embattled Protestants to deal confidently with me, a Jesuit priest. "The Jesuit" had always been the most frightening figure in their horror of Catholics.

With Israelis, I had the experience of years of Jewish-Christian dialogue, and an established habit of reverence for Jewish faith, though once again I realized that it was harder for Jews to deal with me in my faith than it was for me with theirs. And, as in Northern Ireland, I was

meeting many people for whom faith had become marginal or been discarded altogether, often for the genuine reason that they felt the leadership of their religious communities had disastrously failed them. With Palestinians there were no such problems, because Christian and Muslim felt so immediately their common identity as Palestinians in face of their trouble with Israelis, and seldom allowed their difference in faith to interfere with their commitment to the Palestinian cause.

So it was not until I became closely involved with the various confessional communities of Lebanon that I first had to confront, for myself and in the most existential way, my own Catholic Christian response, in the midst of war, to Muslim faith. I had never been much acquainted with Muslim faith before, and now found, in serious meetings with all elements of the Muslim community, that I would speak, with an ease that shocked me, of "the spiritual riches of Islam." I had to ask myself if this was hypocrisy. What did I mean by it? Did I even know what I was saying? This was a time of intensive self-questioning for me. Over a period of months I had to discuss it with everyone I met — Christian and Muslim, clergy, professional people, leaders of sectarian parties and militias, ordinary suffering citizens, all.

Eventually I came to this understanding for myself.

I know very well the difference between faith in one God and a classical paganism. We value much in the Greek and Roman cultures of ancient times, our heritage from them of law and criteria of beauty. Their religion, however, with its multiple deities, taught as its central tenet that our world is a place of terror. Forces overwhelmingly stronger than ourselves surround us: the sun, the sea, storm and drought, war, plague, unruly appetite and dissension, love and lust, hatred, envy, and many more.

The ancients hypostatized these forces, personified them as separate deities, male and female. They saw them as the real determinants of the world we live in. This was essentially what life was about.

These gods and goddesses had no coherent order among themselves, nor any real care for us, whom they treated at best with indifference, at worst with hostility. It was the task of life to hold them at bay, to keep ourselves and those dearest to us — family, clan, if possible even a nation — safe from them. That defined religion and the work of religious faith. We could do no more than to bribe these dangerous deities by

our offerings and cower before their wrath and their envy. Sooner or later, we would lose. They would defeat us.

If we look at our contemporaries, we find that, for many of them, life still represents danger, terror, with its central task consisting in protecting ourselves and those we love from all the frightful things that can harm us. That they no longer hypostatize these dangers into gods and goddesses is far less important than that the forces that define life are the same. Some of these contemporaries regard themselves as good Christians, Muslims, or Jews, yet still place the work of protecting themselves from these terrors at the center of their lives. Others consider themselves post-religious, agnostic, even atheist, yet pay tribute to these terrifying forces by mobilizing all their energies in the effort to contain their imagined threat.

Monotheistic faith tells us that none of this is true. We are safe, in our lives, in our world, in our history, because God is with us. Jews have this as recurrent theme throughout the Hebrew Scripture, practically a signature statement when it is the Lord who speaks: "Do not be afraid; do not be dismayed. Take courage, lift up your hearts, because I am with you." The same sequence of assurances runs as a current throughout the Christian Gospels and in many other parts of the New Testament. The coming of Christ among us has essentially this meaning. Our salvation arises from what the Lord has done for us, from the love he has shown us, from the promises he makes us, to which he will prove faithful. That is the good news. Muslims, in their principled monotheism, share this faith in God who is with us, who gives our life its meaning, who makes our world the place of his work for our good.

This is not too complicated to understand. It requires faith to believe it, and to live in trust of it. We have it in common with Jews and Muslims, though differently nuanced, and ensconced in divergent cultural origins. Can I then regard their claim that their faith is gift of God as legitimate, as I do my own Catholic and Christian claim?

We have been through this question with Jews. For most of our common history, we Christians dismissed Judaism as a superseded religion: the Jews, having failed to receive Christ, the Messiah, had lost their place as God's chosen people to us. On that basis, we persecuted them mercilessly for close to two millenia, recognizing only in the latter part of the 20th century, after the crimes of the Shoah, that we had been wrong all along, that God remains faithful to his covenant with this

people, that our own faith rests on theirs as its presupposition, that it requires our recognition of their chosenness by God.

For Jews, the question is different. They received the revelation and the promises of God. What need have they of us Christians? Who are we to say we have what they have not? We come onto their horizon as a challenge to the legitimacy of their faith.

Muslims are, to us Christians, much as we are to the Jews: the newcomers, the challenge, the claim to supersede our faith, even as they grant their recognition to us as "people of the book." Christians have historically rejected their claim, and our traditional response has been mostly war. Can we then do other than that?

As I pondered this, during my stay in Lebanon, I recognized that God, who reveals himself, can require of me that I remain faithful to his revelation as it is transmitted to me through Christian tradition.

Equally clearly, I have to admit that I cannot own God. I cannot demand of him that he act or reveal himself only as I know him through the tradition I have received. He remains free. "Then Spirit breaths where he will." He can reveal himself as he chooses.

I do not have the experience of knowing God through the tradition of Muslim faith. I have received faith in God through Christian tradition, which is precious to me. But as I see the piety and the life of faith of the Muslim community — imperfect, of course, like my own — I find myself bound, even in faithfulness to God as he reveals himself in my own tradition, to recognize him at work in the faith of Muslims. This constitutes, I believe, no derogation of my Christian faith, but actually springs from it.

I had to struggle very hard to come to this kind of recognition, and found it a highly liberating understanding when I had reached it. Speaking then to Maronites in Lebanon, Catholic Christians who had lived as neighbors to Muslims all their lives, I discovered they rarely asked themselves these questions, although they were of the essential tissue of their lives. Not to have asked them, or to have allowed this dimension of their own Christian life to remain unexamined, had left them exposed to simple paranoia in the face of the foreign, the unintelligible, in Muslim faith. They had resorted to rejection, dismissal, and the resultant hostility had become a ready instrument for their war with the Muslims of their society. They had failed to recognize a sister faith.

Has this relevance to the situation in Bosnia, in Croatia, in Serbia? Christians, both Orthodox and Catholic, and Muslims have first contacted each other in circumstances of geopolitical conflict and conquest. They have lived with one another through the building of a coherent common civilization, in which Sarajevo especially stood out as a beacon of tolerant pluralism to the rest of the world. They have striven together for freedom from conflicting empires, struggled together against the tyrannical ideologies of our last century. Now differences of faith, too little examined in the past, have been used by cynical politicians to create divisions and hostility that need not have existed, to set whole populations against one another for purposes that have truly nothing to do with their faith.

Have these questionings, both theological and, for me, existential, something to offer in the war situation that Catholics and Muslims experience now in the Philippines? I will not presume to answer that, but only offer these musings to you.