

The Metamorphosis of the Notion of *Love of God* and of “*Neighbor*”

An Interpretation of the Root *hbb* [to love] in the Koran

Updated 2013

From November 4th to 6th, 2008, an important Catholic-Muslim symposium was held in Rome, which gathered together two delegations of 29 representatives each.

Its main theme: “Love of God and Love of Neighbor” had been delineated in: *A common Word Between Us and You*, the Letter of the 138 Islamic scholars to Pope Benedict XVI and Christian leaders. It presented Islam as “religion of love of God and love of the close one”, according to the Arabic version of the Letter. “The-close-one”, *al-jar* in Arabic, means “the-closest-to-me”, a sense far from the universal reach of the word *neighbor* – *al-qarib* in Arabic –, which Jesus uses in Luke 10:23-37 (parable of the good Samaritan), as the main promoter of this symposium, [Samir Khalil](#) commented. The significant Arabic restriction does not appear in the English version.

So, what then? Perspectives for the future, or deadlock?

Not without leaving unaddressed a couple of important questions, the final declaration of the symposium does advocate “respect of the person and his or her choices in matters of conscience and religion”, given the acknowledged basis of “common rights”. The affirmation of such a principle is essential, this could not be emphasized enough. Furthermore, it insists upon “renouncing any oppression, aggressive violence, terrorism, especially when perpetrated in the name of religion”.

A few Muslim signatories showed a certain degree of hesitancy as to some of those formulations that could have caused them problems, but the step was finally taken. These principles come to the fore strengthened with the prospect of another gathering scheduled for before 2010; even if this symposium has scarcely been echoed in Islamic countries, it may very well in the future [1]. Doubtlessly, one of the main ambiguities regards the question of the communal rights to be fought for. Islamic communities in the West, which the text seriously presents as being oppressed, are paralleled with the fate of Christians in Islamic countries, whose lives are often really threatened, not to mention about their children and possessions.

The final declaration of the symposium also leans towards giving credence to an implicit idea, namely: that all religions are equally good, while the straying from religion’s genuine purpose to excesses is assuredly blameful. Indeed, such an idea (in keeping with the general trend today of religious indifferentism) could hardly have failed to be propounded. It has been sanctioned for more than twenty years in the mainstream media, and Muslim intellectuals echo it as well. However, we will not dwell on this matter here. Instead, we want to take a close look at the Koranic text itself in order to really know what it actually says or wants to say as to the *love of God and of the close-one* – as was the theme to the symposium according to the words of its under-title in Arabic.

• Occurrences of the Root *hbb* [to Love]

First of all, it is fitting to locate in the Koranic text the several instances of the root *hbb*, to love. The number of cases matters: 133. We find this root essentially in its verbal form and in a variety of contexts, a little like its English equivalent. The substantive form barely appears, in most cases in connection with the verb. With the exception of verse 2:165 (where the root *hbb* appears 4 times), the expression “love of God” (*hubb Llahi*) is not to be found, but man is said or invited to love God four times (2:177; 3:31; 5:54 + 24:22 to love the fact that God forgives).

1 These projects have failed to materialize.

Reference is sometimes made, in a negative fashion, to “the love of possessions /things” (**hubb** 3:14; 76:8; 89:20; 100:8), as well as, from a contrary position, to not *loving /liking* them (38:32; 49:12; 61:13; 75:20; 76:27; 89:20 + 6:76 where Abraham is said not to love fleeting things). One can also *love* (**hbb**) a desirable goal (3:152.188; 9:108 + 49:7 the faith made lovable). The root scarcely appears to convey the human sentiment /feeling of love (3:119; 7:79 [negatively]; 12:8.30; 28:56 [obscure meaning]).

Inversely, the root **hbb** shows up quite often in reference to God’s attitude towards men, for instance, in such somewhat stereotyped expressions as: “God loves those who purify themselves, or the pious ones, or those who repent, etc.” (about twenty times in the course of the Koranic text). They seem overall fairly restrictive. Others are expressly negative: God does **not** love those who violate summons (to fight, 2:190; not to make unlawful, 5:87; not to trespass the bounds of privacy, 7:55), disorder (2:205), the usurer *kafir* (= *infidel* or *wicked* – 2:276), *kafir-s* (3:32), wrongdoers (3:57.140), the arrogant and vainglorious (4:36), he who gives to perfidy and crime (4:107), evil speech (4:148), mischievous **Jews** (5:64), the wasters (6:141; 7:31), the treacherous (8:58), the boastful one (16:23), traitors to faith or *kafir-s* (22:38), the bragger who exults (28:76), those who do mischief (28:77), the unfaithful or *kafir-s* (30:45), any arrogant boaster (31:18; 57:23), evildoers (42:40).

One must not forget that to be rejected from the love of God means to be doomed to hell-fire: the Jews, who incur God’s wrath (as affirmed in sura **1**, the *Fatiha* introducing prayer), are marked for irrevocable condemnation to dwell therein (2:80; 3:24; 4:46-47; 5:78 etc. + 98:6), joining up with Christians (targeted in the introductory *Fatiha* as well + 4:51.116; 5:33.72; etc.).

• A God Who Loves Nobody But Those Who Sacrifice All to Him

The vision put forward in the Koran becomes clearer. Never is the Koran affirming that God loves all men. He nevertheless appears as loving some, which can also be accounted for in the Bible. However, in the latter, the language expressing God’s favor is typically balanced with affirmations of His universal love. Such affirmations are not to be found in the Koran. Likewise, if God is said to be merciful – repeatedly so throughout the Koran – one must understand that He “chooses for His special mercy whom He wills” (2:105; 3:74; etc.). To come up with the notion of universal love on the part of the God of Islam, the authors of the final declaration of the Roman symposium have had to appeal to a word, allegedly preserved in tradition, spoken by Muhammad: “a *hadith* indicates that God’s loving compassion for humankind is greater, even than that of a mother for her child (Muslim, *Bab al-Tawba* 21)”. However, other *hadiths*, from the 600,000 that have been fabricated, point to the opposite direction. The purport was notwithstanding commendable.

All in all, in the Koran and according to the spirit of Islam’s tradition, only one category of men is loved by God, a state of affairs that particularly comes to the fore in the last Koranic verse in which God is said to love:

Llāha yu**ḥ**ibbu llaḡīna yuqātilūna fī sabīli-hī : God loves those who go so far as to kill *in His way* (formula signifying: *for His cause*) (61:4).

Let us not delude ourselves as to translate the 3rd form (*to go so far as*) of the verb *qatala*, *to kill*, as *to fight*. This would simply amount to conveniently shifting the meaning. The notion of *fighting* does not imply in and of itself that of *killing*. Besides, the notion of *wrestling-fighting*, as that of *effort*, is expressed by another verb, *jahada* (from which we derive *jihad*, *wrestle*). Those whom God loves are those ready to kill for Him.

This state of affairs is not without distressing Pope Benedict XVI, as well as some Muslim people affirming not to recognize themselves in a Koranic tradition they claim to be ill-adapted to our times. But, was it adapted even in the seventh-century? In fact, it is necessary to understand the logic implicit to the text beyond the immediate perception that stumbles with the question: how can a God, whom we imagine good, approve of evil actions, while ordering the good and

forbidding evil? For centuries this question has presented itself as a dead end in which philosophy sinks in attempting to understand what Islam is. It all begins to make a little more sense if we get onto the whole issue another way.

Let us consider the symposium's second theme, namely: "Love of *Neighbor* (according to the English version) or of *Close-one* (according to the Arabic version)". In the Koran, the concern is with love as it relates to those who are *near* (*relatives, friends in a neighborhood*). It does not regard whoever becomes *the neighbor*, let alone enemies. There is the exception of one verse (Sura *al-Imran* v.119), which must be read following what precedes:

3:118 "O you who believe! Take not as confidants those outside yourselves [...] Hatred has already appeared from their mouths [that of the people doomed to hell, cf. v.116], but what their hearts conceal is far worse..."

3:119 "You, **you love them**, but they do not love you; and you believe **in the whole Book** [they don't]. When they meet you, they say: "We believe." But, when they are alone, they bite off the very tips of their fingers at you in their rage. Say: "Perish in your rage"! "

3:119 : hā-'antum 'ulā' i tuḥibbūnahum wa-lā yuḥibbunakum wa-tu'minūna **bi-l-kitābi kullihī** wa-'idā laqūkum qālū 'āmannā wa-'idā ḥalaw 'aḍḍū 'alaykumu l-'anāmila mina l-ḡayzi qul mūtū bi-ḡayzikum

• When Love Turns Into a Justification of Hatred

To come to grip with the extent of the significance of these verses, it is necessary to identify those who are pointed at: they are said to be filled with hatred towards true believers and to adhere only to a part of the "Book". Which Book? It cannot be the Koran, which does not yet exist, and which one never *partially* believes in. The reproval frequently encountered in the Koran with respect to "hiding" a portion of the Book (6:91; etc.) "while they know it" (3:78) provides a good clue. It always points to the (rabbinic) Jews which it blames, not just for some partial pushing aside of the *Prophets and ketuvim* (the biblical books after the Torah), but rather for radically rejecting *the Book*. But, as has been shown [2], the "whole Book" frequently referred to as prototype and held to be kept in Heaven (85:21-22; [3]), is "*the Torah and the injil-gospel*" (singular – 3:3.48.65; 5:66.68.110; 7:157; [9:111] + 28:49 "these two books"). *On earth*, it presents itself under the form of a *Lectionary* (Syriac: *qor'ôno* – Arabic: *qur'an*) used by true "believers" when they gather together, which obviously is one and the same as the "Koran" about which the Koranic text itself refers more than 60 times [4].

Of this *Book*, the rabbinic Jews cannot but reject the second part, the *injil* derived from the Gospel of Matthew. They systematically reject any reference or indication as to Jesus's Messiahship (Jesus, called *Messiah* 11 times in our Islamic Koran). Such a refusal, according to the Koran, provides the explanation as to why God cannot love the Jews and dooms them all to hell. The whole theory falls into place.

2 Edouard-Marie Gallez, *Le messie et son prophète*, vol. II (Paris: éditions de Paris, 2005), 180-216.

3 An Islamic interpretive reading sees here an allusion to the heavenly Koran, and it is the same with the verse 34:31. The sentence: "And those who are *kafaring* say: 'We will never believe in this *Qur'an* nor in that before it' [or *him* – literally: *in that between its /his hands*]" has been readen according to one of these two *legendological* competing ways: "neither in this Koran nor in the heavenly Koran", or: "neither in the heavenly Koran nor in that before *him* [*in his hands* – of Muhammad]" (*ibid.*, p. 464 according to the 2005 edition or 465).

The original meaning of this first sentence of verse 34:31 probably refers to the *Injil* and to the Torah which precedes it.

4 Among these occurrences, it is necessary to subtract that which have been subsequently added with the intention of suggesting the self-designation of the Koran, understood as a book that does not yet exist but which, thanks to a divine miracle, refers to itself as a complete book.

Now here in sura 3 *al-Imran*, one might be surprised with the attitude full of “good sentiments” expressed in verse 119: the true believers are said to **love** the (rabbinic) Jews. Yet, because the latter hate the former (v.118), they all the more deserve to be detested. The true believers are accordingly set in the position of the **victims** who only have got to defend themselves. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss did not shy from keenly analyzing the mechanism of this attitude in the pages he devoted to the Islamic phenomenon (or, as one might rather say today, the ‘Islamist’ phenomenon) [5].

The underlying logic here is implacable. The true believer **loves** humankind. The salvation of the world is his goal, and this goal is so great that it is well worth all sacrifices. **The end justifies the means**, because it greatly exceeds man individually, or even as a community. Human life is but naught in the face of the salvation wished by God. In return, the God of love **loves** those who sacrifice all to Him and are willing “to go as far as to kill” for His sake. And it is He who takes upon Himself the responsibility of the massacres perpetrated in His Name (8:17; 9:14; etc.). It all fits together.

As far as the reasoning is concerned, one cannot point to any mistake. It is the goal that is questionable, not the means, presented as legitimate in the light of two reasons: ● First, in view to the end quested after ● Second, because he who “fights in God’s way” is automatically the victim of other men who, under the hold of Satan, are maintained in ignorance (*jahiliyya*) of Islamic Revelation, or worst, reject it. Such are the ones who prevent those God has chosen (3:110) to serve Him by taking over the whole world. As Muslim, a believer is always pure and always the victim of non-Muslims, whatever he does. Many present-day preachers don’t miss an opportunity to make the point clear: Islam is Good. Islam is pure. A somewhat similar mindset has sometimes been observed amongst baptized people who, falling into the traps of ideological trends and distorting agendas, brought Christianity down to the level of a mere “cause” to be fought for. Nevertheless, this alteration of Christianity’s authentic meaning and the outrage it gave rise to has always scandalized Christian conscience and accordingly been denounced.

● Moving Beyond Lies to Look Forwards Together to the Future

The unique bottom line question therefore is the following: has God revealed to man a system allowing him to root up evil from this world? If so, everything holds together. The philosophical blind alley of a God standing surety for evil acts vanishes into thin air. Those whom God has chosen above all others [6] stand in a position to assert that they **love** God. They adore a God who holds them up above all others. They can also declare that they **love** these *others*, even when they butcher them, snatch their children, banish them away from their homes, etc. The Koranic faithful sincerely thinks he **loves** God and other people. To his eyes, other people hate him whereas they should be grateful to him.

Unmistakably, we are here dealing here with a radical alteration of the Biblical Revelation, most specifically of the Revelation of Jesus. No 7th-century man could have “made this up” so suddenly, out of thin air. So *drastic* a revision, indeed down to the root itself, could only have resulted from a circle of people originally familiar with the Apostles – before leaving them. That is the reason why the small development above concerning “the Torah and the *injl*” was not superfluous. For it shades light on the identity of those who are the targets of “Koranic” preaching, namely the rabbinic Jews; while it also reveals the identity of those who were then trying to indoctrinate the Arabs, namely: other Jews who themselves believed in “Jesus the Messiah” (the expression occurs four times in the Koran).

5 See pages 463-469 in *Tristes tropiques* (1955). Claude Lévi-Strauss therein evokes “the annihilation of the other” thought of as witnessing to another faith and way of conducting oneself (p. 467 in the 2001 edition).

6 The “ideal society” possesses the form of a theocratic pyramid whose height is God Himself, followed by His faithful ones, each according to his rank, etc. (2:178.221; 4:25; 6:165; 16:71.75.76; 24:33; 30:28; 61:9; etc. In 3:55, we read: “O Jesus [...] I will make those who follow you superior to those who have *kfr* [who reject Faith or infidels]”).

These textual clues overlap with many other pieces of data points which equally shade light on the actual starting point of the phenomenon of Islam; for example, the 520 occurrences of the root *kfr* found in the Koran: its various meanings directly originate from the Hebrew Bible as well as from the Aramaic text of Matthew's Gospel, including the most unexpected [7]. It accordingly appears that, in some way, Islam stands as the continuation of a reversal of the Revelation of God's love first received by Jewish people in a cultural and historical situation which, likewise, is that of Christianity itself. Crucial to a properly informed view of early Christianity and the New Testament is the need to replace them back in their original Semitic life setting, that of first-century Judaism. Indeed no one can ever fruitfully account for the phenomenon of apostolic Christianity without coming to terms with the key fact that it was almost exclusively comprised of Jewish people for several generations in a row. This perspective proves critically helpful in allowing us today to look afresh at the history of "the Arab Prophet" (whose biography was first put together two centuries after the alleged events) in order to reappraise it by way of a more objective historical scholarship freed from a priori conceptions.

The question raised above may now disclose its real stakes: *has God revealed to man a system allowing him to root up evil from this world?* The New Testament bears witness to it, though one does need to take the pain of turning to places regrettably left basically unread today. Some current trends in prevailing circles of biblical scholarship have been pulled towards ideological reinterpretations of parts of the Gospels while disavowing others. But it is precisely to those that we urgently ought to return so as to read them afresh. Not in the light of contemporary exegetical studies, which on the questions at stake here have overall demonstrated their uselessness, but together with Jewish and Muslim friends who will not fail to raise up the right questions.

Interreligious dialogue is critical – Pope Benedict XVI has made it very clear from the outset of his pontificate – and more so than ever in times such as ours where people are massively misinformed and manipulated to the core. But there exists no guarantee whatsoever that a « dialogue » such as that which just took place in Rome will have the effect of keeping off the perspective of grievous troubles in our cities. Its final declaration can only be a step. Never can we expect to alleviate rancor and hatred by simply coating them with the word "love".

Nor are we to help the temperature of dissentient or warlike discourses spoken in the name of God drop in by breaking the thermometer of words.

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7 See [the root KFR in the Koran and in the Bible](#) – cf. Edouard-Marie Gallez, *La racine kfr, importance et significations bibliques, post-bibliques et coraniques*, in *Le texte arabe non islamique. Actes du colloque de Toulouse [2007]*, coll. *Studia Arabica XI*, éd. de Paris, janvier 2009, 67-87).