

Theological Anthropology In Interreligious Perspective

7- 9 March 2018
University of Tübingen

Conference report

The Eberhard Karls Universität *Tübingen* held the international conference **Theological Anthropology in Interreligious Perspective** (7-9 March 2018), organised by the **Center for Islamic Theology** and the **Faculty for Protestant Theology** of the **University of Tübingen**, together with the **Cambridge Muslim College** and the **St. Andrew's Biblical Theological Institute in Moscow**. The event sought to create a space for interreligious academic dialogue based on theological approaches to the human being promoting mutual understanding as well as a comprehensive study of the Islamic and Christian traditions.

In the welcome speech, organisers LEJLA DEMIRI and CHRISTOPH SCHWÖBEL reiterated the importance of mutual collaboration between religious groups, and emphasized the need for a dialogue-based discourse in which commonalities are recognised. They also stressed the importance of interdisciplinary and intergenerational cooperation between scholars.

Michael Tilly (Tübingen) chaired the first panel, entitled 'Approaching the Whole Human Being', in which the notion of the human being was discussed from various perspectives. CHRISTOPH SCHWÖBEL (Tübingen) presented a thorough analysis of Martin Luther's views on the subject, and also examined how Luther's conception of the human being influenced his theological discourse. Further, through a comparison of Luther's views with those of Yehuda ha-Levi and al-Ghāzālī, Schwöbel demonstrated how theology provides a framework for understanding the anthropological definition of human nature. TIM WINTER (Cambridge) explored the phenomenological interpretations of the connection between the body and reason offered by two Muslim thinkers and cultural icons: Leda Rafanelli and Valentine de Saint-Point. Winter also discussed other examples of embodied cognition in Judaism and Christianity. Furthermore, Winter demonstrated how consciousness of biology can be commensurate with an ontological reality, a notion that can be summarized by the following words from Merleau-Ponty: 'the world is not what I feel but what I live'.

In the second panel, 'The Dignity and Misery of Humans', chaired by Alexei Bodrov (Moscow), RECEP ŞENTÜRK (Istanbul) addressed the need for a meaning of the human being, with special consideration for the definition of human rights. He maintained that despite their differences, Abrahamic religions share a common ground in the concept of *ādamiyya* (being a child of Adam). According to several Muslim authors, this concept is developed through a synthesis of the Islamic conceptions of dignity and the inviolability of the human (*işmā*). Şentürk defended the potential of these concepts for a legal and moral discussion about human rights. DAN MADIGAN's (Washington DC) presentation dealt with the Christian notion of 'original sin'. Madigan sought to establish a dialogue with Muslim sources in order to develop a constructive critique of certain Christian views of sin and salvation. Madigan aimed to provide an interpretation that bestows dignity on the human. Following these thematic discussions, RALF K. WÜSTENBERG (Flensburg) drew a comparison between Biblical and Quranic narratives of the 'fall', pointing to commonalities and differences with regards to the way human sin is portrayed by authors from the two religious traditions. As Wüstenberg stated, 'both people have fallen, but in different ways and in different depths'.

With David Marshall (Washington DC) as chair, the third panel, 'Naming God and Naming the Human', opened with CONOR CUNNINGHAM's (Nottingham) paper. Cunningham vindicated the relevance of anthropology for the welfare of the human being. Unlike the materialist and reductionist views of the world that can be found in other sciences, anthropology provides dynamic explanations that draw us nearer to the truth. Cunningham thus advocated theologians to readdress perspectives on anthropology. The following speaker PAUL HARDY (New York), offered a constructive example of how such an approach can be applied. Hardy explained how divine naming in Christianity and Islam follow similar patterns. Both attest to the distinction between linguistic inscription and description, which in the case of Islam, is represented by the contrast between *ishāra* and *'ibāra*. However, both religions ultimately reject this dualism when considering the unfeasibility of God, which transcends the generalities of predicates.

The next day of the conference began with a panel dedicated to 'Human in Relation to God', chaired by Katrin König (Tübingen). The first speaker, SAMER RASHWANI (Tübingen), dealt with the question of the imitation of God, showing how this notion varies according to Muslim interpretation. He focused on the moral-intellectual interpretation, in which the believer imitates God by pursuing truth and perfection of character and behaviour. Rashwani concluded that man's obedience to God's orders might be justified by God's moral qualities, which constitute Him as a moral model. The second speaker, SIMONE DARIO NARDELLA (Calabria), unravelled 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulūsī's *al-Wujūd al-Ḥaqq* (The True Being), and presented the author's rational explanation of the unity of existence. For Nardella, this approach opens a new path to understand this concept and broaden its application to a wider audience. In doing so, the concept of *al-wahdat al-wujūd* (the unity of existence) may inspire interreligious insights. The final speaker, MICHAEL KIRWAN (London), revisited Girard's mimetic theory and examined its theological insights beyond its original religious framework, considering its applicability in Islam. Kirwan suggested that answering this question may lead to the establishment of an interfaith 'Common Word'.

Erdal Toprakyan (Tübingen) chaired the panel about 'Personhood and Religious Experience'. The first speaker SA'DIYYA SHAYKH (Cape Town) explored interpretations of Ibn 'Arabī concerning anthropology and gender, and brought these ideas into conversation with contemporary Islam. She formulated critical questions in relation to hierarchies, paradigms of gender engagement and gender ethics in order to encourage the adoption of new perspectives by today's Muslim communities. CARLÒ CAMILLERI (Malta) examined Teresa de Jesús' doctrine of mystical transformation. Specifically, Camilleri investigated the different approaches Teresa de Jesús adopted towards the concept of ecstatic union according to her mystical theory. These approaches are based on interior growth and involve love for others, detachment and humility. In her paper, AMINA NAWAZ (Tübingen) explored the devotional interests that are documented in Morisco texts. While Moriscos maintained their interest in Islam, their texts reveal a clear correlation with Christian devotional interests, best represented by the importance of the time for performing ritual prayers. In her final remarks, Nawaz reflected upon the experience of being a believer within a pluralistic context.

The last panel of the day, with Volker Leppin (Tübingen) as chair, was devoted to 'Death, Suffering and Spiritual Growth'. As the first speaker DONNA ORSUTO (Rome) stressed, the certainty that every human being must die regardless of their religious conviction opens up the opportunity for a universal anthropological perspective. Orsuto brought to light the cases of Catherine of Siena and Julian of Norwich who lived during the plague when death and suffering were a part of everyday life. Orsuto showed how these two mystics transcended these circumstances through the adoption of Jesus' passion as an instructive guide, perceiving death and suffering as supreme devotional acts. LEJLA DEMIRI (Tübingen) investigated conceptions

of death in Islam through a study of Islamic revelation and scriptural traditions which reveal a combination of linear and cyclical understandings of time. In addition, Demiri explored the ontology of death, presenting a number of medieval theologians who viewed death not as the elimination of life. In her paper, SVETLANA KONACHEVA (Moscow) offered an account of the Christian thanatological discourses of the 20th century. She observed that in Heidegger, death determines and encompasses human existence, whilst it directs man to becoming himself. Later, Karl Rahner and Eberhard Jüngel considered death as part of their theological anthropology: Rahner did so through the notion of ‘theomus death’, whereas Jüngel enhanced the presence of God beyond life.

The third and last day of the conference opened with a panel dedicated to ‘Children and the Formation of Persons’, chaired by Aaron Looney (Tübingen). MUJADAD ZAMAN (Tübingen) provided an overview of a broad variety of sources depicting children, their nature, and education in the medieval Islamic context. Furthermore, Zaman explored the potentiality of applying those views in modern pedagogical discourses and interfaith dialogues. FRIEDRICH SCHWEITZER (Tübingen) emphasized the special role of children in the Christian tradition where infants often exemplified the true Christian existence through their special relationship with God. Schweitzer further expressed the need for incorporating the child in both Christian and Muslim anthropologies in order to enable a dialogue over questions such as their religious status and rights, pedagogy, authority, and autonomy.

The final panel of the conference, ‘The Cultures of Being and Becoming Human’, was chaired by Stefan Schreiner (Tübingen). ILSHAT NASYROV (Moscow) spoke about the challenges of contemporary Muslims in the context of a common global space. Nasyrov supported the notion of Cultural Islam in front of Political Islam as the most effective approach when understood as the adherence to the principles of justice and reason and the imperative of doing good. IVANA NOBLE (Prague) explored the tension between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’, stemming from the Christian interpretation of the creation narratives. She demonstrated why numerous patristic and modern theologians considered this tension as creative and necessary – leading to the understanding of the human person not as a ‘finished’ universe, but as someone whose completeness is in growth. The final presentation by RUGGERO VIMERCATI SANSEVERINO (Tübingen) examined the notion of *ittibā’ al-nabī* (following the Prophet) as a religious act and explored the anthropological premises that can be derived from it. In order to evaluate if such an anthropology may have theological implications, he raised several quotations from the Quran and the Hadith that demonstrate how intrinsic it is to Islamic revelation.

In their closing remarks, co-organisers TIM WINTER and ALEXEI BODROV celebrated the success of the event, highlighting the broad and fruitful exchanges that took place, and the positive outcome of cooperation between the organising institutions. Winter and Bodrov expressed that this was the first of a series of conferences that would take place at different locations in the future. They further conveyed how crucial such exchanges are for strengthening an East-West connection in Muslim-Christian dialogue, given the long history of Muslim presence in Russia.