

Address at al-Azhar al-Sharif Cairo, 2004

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams

I am very deeply moved by the honour of being invited to address you in this place, as a guest and, I hope, as a friend. It is some twenty five years since I first visited this great city and al-Azhar mosque; and I can remember my wonder and delight at the quality of its buildings and the atmosphere of dedication and calm reflection expressed in the very stones of the walls.

I am here as a Christian, to speak to you of some of those matters which both unite us and divide us. In the world as it is now developing, it is of the most central importance that we as Christians and Muslims understand one another better. I am delighted at the continuing commitment to this process that has been shown here, a commitment evident in these last few days. And better understanding means understanding our differences as well as our common vision. In these few remarks, I want to meditate a little on the greatest theme of both Muslim and Christian faith, the doctrine of God; and I want to suggest how, despite some of our differences, we can, in the light of our belief about Almighty God, together make certain affirmations to the world about the way to peace and justice for human beings.

If I understand the doctrine of Islam correctly, its most important conviction can be expressed in the word *tawhid*. God is one. No being is associated with God as a second reality deserving of worship and obedience. God has no need of any being outside his own eternal and self-sufficient life. In

these words, I do no more than repeat some of the most luminous and uncompromising words of the Qur'an, which I give in the new translation by Muhammad Abdel Haleem.

‘God:

there is no god but Him,
the Ever Living, the Ever Watchful.’ (*al Baqara* 255)

‘He is God the One,
God the eternal.

He fathered no one nor was he fathered.

No one is comparable to Him.’ (*al 'Ikhlās* 1–4)

This last text reminds the Christian that this great affirmation of the uniqueness of God is what has always caused Muslims to look with suspicion at Christian doctrines of God. Christian belief about God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit appears at once to compromise the belief that God has no other being associated with him. How can we call God *al Qayyūm*, the Self-sufficient, if he is not alone? So we hear in *al Baqara* 115–117,

‘The East and the West belong to God:

wherever you turn, there is His Face.

God is all pervading and all knowing.

They have asserted, "God has a child."

May He be exalted! No!

Everything in the heavens and earth belongs to Him,
everything devoutly obeys His will.

He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth,

and when He decrees something, He says only "Be," and it is.’

The belief that God could have a son is, for the faithful Muslim, a belief suggesting that God needs something other than himself and is subject to the processes of limited bodies by 'begetting' a child. How can such a God

be truly free and sovereign? For we know that he is able to bring the world into being by his word alone.

Yet these anxieties do not belong only to Muslims. Egypt was, in the first centuries of the Christian era, the location of great debates on just such matters. Indeed, without the contribution of Egypt, Christian theology would have been infinitely poorer, for many of the greatest minds of that period were natives of Alexandria. And one of the great concerns of these thinkers and their successors was this: if Christians say that the eternal Word and power of God was fully present in Jesus, son of Mary, can we avoid saying this in such a way as to imply that God is subject to a physical process, or that God has a second being alongside him? These Christian sages believed as strongly as any Muslim that God was self-sufficient and free, and that he could not be affected or limited by physical processes and did not act as a physical cause among others. They say quite explicitly that when we speak of the father 'begetting' the Son, we must put out of our minds any suggestion that this is a physical thing, a process like the processes of the world.

Those Christian thinkers and their successors developed a doctrine which tried to clarify this: they said that the name 'God' is not the name of a person like a human person, a limited being with a father and mother and a place that they inhabit within the world. 'God' is the name of a kind of life – eternal and self-sufficient life, always active, needing nothing. And that life is lived eternally in three ways which are made known to us in the history of God's revelation to the Hebrew people and in the life of Jesus. There is a source of life, an expression of life and a sharing of life. In human language we say, 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit', but we do not mean one God with two beings alongside him, or three gods of limited power. Just as we say, 'Here is my hand, and these are the actions my one hand performs', but it is not different from the actions of my five fingers, so with God: this is

God, the One, the Living and Self-subsistent, but what God does is not different from the life which is eternally at the same time a source and an expression and a sharing of life. Since God's life is always an intelligent and purposeful life, each of these dimensions of divine life can be thought of as a centre of mind and love; but this does not mean that God 'contains' three different individuals, separate from each other as human individuals are.

And Christians believe that this life enters into ours in a limited degree. When God takes away our evil-doing and our guilt, when he forgives us and sets us free, he breathes new life into us, as he breathed life into Adam at the first. That breathing into us we call the 'Spirit'. As we become mature in our new life, we become more and more like the expression of divine life, the Word whom we encounter in Jesus. Because Jesus prayed to the source of his life as 'Father', we call the eternal expression of God's life the 'Son'. And so too we pray to the source of divine life in the way that Jesus taught us, and we say 'Father' to this divine reality.

But in no way does the true Christian say that the life and action of God could be divided into separate parts, as if it were a material thing. In no way does the true Christian say that there is more than one God or that God needs some other in order to act or that God promotes some other being to share his glory. There is one divine action, one divine will; yet (like the fingers of the hand) there are three ways in which that life is real, and it is only in those three ways that the divine life is real – as source and expression and sharing. It is because of those three ways in which divine life exists that Christians speak as they do about what it means to grow in holiness.

And the Christian also says something which may again be a source of disagreement. God is a loving God, as we all agree; but, says the Christian, God does not love simply because he decides to love. He is always, eternally, loving. His very nature, his definition is love. And the interaction and relation between the three ways in which God lives, the source and the expres-

sion and the sharing, is eternally the way God exists. The three centres of divine action, which we call Father, Son and Spirit, pour out the divine life to each other for all eternity, a sort of perfect circle of giving and receiving. And the only word we can use for that relationship of pouring out and giving is love. So as we grow in holiness, we become closer and closer in our actions and thoughts to the complete self-giving that always exists perfectly in God's life. Towards this fullness we are all called to travel and grow.

Now these are difficult matters, and the greatest minds of the Christian Church have always found them hard to put into words. But what I wish to say to you today is simply that the disagreement between Christian and Muslim is not, I believe, a disagreement about the nature of God as One and Living and Self-subsistent. For us as for you, it is essential to think of God as a life that has no limit, as a life that is free. God is never to be listed alongside other beings. All through the centuries that we call the Middle Ages, Christians, Muslims and Jews thought alike about this, and our greatest philosophers, Thomas Aquinas, Ibn Sina, Maimonides and others, all worked to make this clear. They would all have agreed that only if God is alone and needs no other is he worthy of our complete worship and devotion. God is not a being who is like us, only greater and more powerful. If God were like us only much greater, we might worship him out of fear instead of giving him free obedience and love. But the true God's freedom is infinite and he can never be limited by any definition. When we have used up all the names that human language can find for him, we shall have spoken true things of him, but never expressed the whole truth which is hidden from created minds. And so we adore him in trust and thankfulness but we accept that we shall never have him in our grasp.

Together we can acknowledge these things. And it is sad that sometimes an unfaithful or careless Christian way of speaking has led Muslims and Jews to believe that we have a doctrine of God that does not recognise the one-

ness and sufficiency of God, or that we worship something less than the One, the Eternal. In our conversations with Muslim friends, we Christians are rightly challenged to think more deeply, to think as our Egyptian Christian fathers did, about the unity of Almighty God.

But there is a practical consequence of this belief about the One Living God. If God is truly not a part of the world, truly self-sufficient, then his will never depends upon how things turn out in the world. We cannot work out what is just and good simply from what seems to work, from what the world finds successful or easy or popular. What is good and just is rooted in eternal truth, in the nature of God, who is what he is quite independently of what the world is and what the world thinks. The world may tell us that we should behave in such and such a way – that we should seek only to make and keep money, that we should break our promises, that we should take revenge and show no mercy, that we should take our pleasures where we like. Sometimes behaviour of this sort seems to bring success in the world. But the believer knows that no amount of worldly success can make bad things good, because nothing in the world can change the will of God, who is beyond all change and cannot be affected or weakened by any other being. So we hold to our calling to virtue and generosity and justice whatever may happen, even if, today and tomorrow, it does not make our life easy and comfortable. We struggle in our interior, spiritual battle, to be faithful to God's will.

The greatest challenge today for our world is how to react to circumstances in a way that is faithful to God's will. Undoubtedly, greed and revenge affect all of us. We feel that we want to defend ourselves in the way that a person without faith or hope or love would understand – in anger and bitterness and unforgiving cruelty. But when we act in such a way, we show that we do not really believe in a God who is living and self-sufficient. We do not believe that God's will is enough; we act as though the circumstances of

this world could so change things that cruelty and fear could become the right tools with which to defend ourselves.

So when the Christian, the Muslim or the Jew sees his neighbour of another faith following the ways of this world instead of the peaceful will of God, he must remind his neighbour of the nature of the one God we look to, whose will cannot be changed and who will himself see that justice is done. Once we let go of justice, fairness and respect in our dealings with one another, we have dishonoured God as well as human beings. I am deeply grateful that it was once again in this country that Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders from the Holy Land under the co-chairmanship of the Grand Imam, Dr Tantawy, signed the Alexandria Declaration together, with its commitment to respect for the rights of the peoples of the Holy Land, its call for justice, and its refusal of terror and violence. How much we still need that vision to inspire us today, as the tragedies of this region of the world continue to resist settlement!

There is no doubt that the present violence throws a deep shadow over conversations between the West and the Muslim world. Three years ago today, I was one of those who shared just a little in the terrible experience of the events in New York. I was in a building just a short distance from the World Trade Centre that morning, and for a while I and my colleagues were trapped there; we were among those fortunate enough to be able to get out of the area just as the second tower collapsed, and we saw at first hand something of the nightmare and the suffering of that day.

On the day after, I was asked by a journalist for some of my reactions. I said that when someone spoke to us in the language of hatred or abuse, we had a choice about what language we might use to reply. So when someone 'spoke' to us in violence and murder, we could choose what we should do. We may rightly want to defend ourselves and one another – our people, our families, the weak and vulnerable among us. But we are not forced to act in

revengeful ways, holding up a mirror to the terrible acts done to us. If we do act in the same way as our enemies, we imprison ourselves in their anger, their evil. And we fail to show our belief in the living God who always requires of us justice and goodness.

So whenever a Muslim, a Christian or a Jew refuses to act in violent revenge, creating terror and threatening or killing the innocent, that person bears witness to the true God. They have stepped outside the way the faithless world thinks. A person without faith, hope and love may say, If I do not use indiscriminate violence and terror, there is no safety for me. The believer says, My safety is with God, whose justice can never be defeated. If I defend myself, I seek to do so only in a way that honours God and God's image in others, and that does not offend against God's justice. To seek to find reconciliation, to refuse revenge and the killing of the innocent, this is a form of adoration towards the One Living and Almighty God.

This is why it is important to be clear about the God we worship. There is, as you will have seen, a great difference between what I as a Christian must say and what the Muslim will say; but we agree absolutely that God has no need of any other being, and that God is not a mixture or a society of different beings. And if we are committed to this God, we shall be able to do justice and act rightly even when the world around us expects us to follow its own violent ways.

And just as I have said that Christians have sometimes spoken carelessly about God and led others to think they believe less than they truly do, so all of us, Jews, Muslims and Christians, have sometimes spoken carelessly and let people think that we live by the same standards as those who have no faith or love, appearing to encourage violence and terror. If we look back to the Alexandria Declaration, we see how it is possible for all of us, in the light of our conviction about God, to be committed to something different from the world's ways; there we find a promise to approach each other with

respect and patience and to turn away from open battle, even when we feel threatened by each other. There too we find the common commitment not to use the name of God to justify violence and injustice. It has been impressive to hear in recent days the strength and clarity with which so many Muslim nations and Muslim leaders have condemned the unspeakable atrocities in Beslan. The common commitment of Muslims and Christians, as of all people of compassion, hope and intelligence, is not for a moment in doubt in this context.

In our own country, we have recently conducted a process in which Muslims and Christians together have listened to the concerns and hopes of many local communities, and we are now hoping to set up a national forum in which the anxieties of Muslim communities may be expressed and freely discussed. And we have also been discussing how each of the religious communities in Britain should react when any one of them is under threat or open attack – so that we hope a Christian community will give support to local Muslims if a mosque is attacked, and Muslims may do the same for local Jews if a synagogue is attacked or a cemetery desecrated, and Muslims and Jews will stand alongside Christians when they are abused and attacked. We pray that this willingness to stand alongside each other will be shared in other nations.

We believe that in such local ways we can, despite our disagreements, show to the world a different standard of behaviour, one that is worthy of the all-powerful and self-sufficient God we worship, worthy of him in a way that crusades and terrorism and oppression are not. All of us need to be able to repent before God for our errors and for the ways in which we are enslaved by a greedy and fearful world. But as our Christian scriptures say, we must not be conformed to this world but transformed, with our minds renewed (Romans 12.2).

If we truly understand the nature of our God, our minds will be renewed. We do not only teach truths about God, we allow those truths to change our lives. May we all find the strength and the courage from Almighty God to honour him by seeking peace together in fairness and respect and thanksgiving for each other.

‘To be one of those who believe
and urge one another to steadfastness and compassion.’
(*al Balad* 17).

And as Jesus says in our own Christian Scriptures,

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
For they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful,
For they will be shown mercy...
Blessed are the peacemakers,
For they will be called children of God (Matthew 5.6-7, 9).

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