

## Evangelion, religion in God's face: African and Semitic con-frontation

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*The clash between belief systems is fed by the force that links their social units to the deities they gave rise to, as Girard eloquently illustrates. Abrahamic faiths read 'religion in the face of God' as the people's link to God, making it the base of social power. But African insights present religion rather as an anti-structural force that seeks to offset power-induced conflicts. Revisiting, in this perspective, the notions of Religion, Islam, Qur'an and Evangelion helps to redefine the religious 'face-to-face with God' as the call to commit oneself to the 'other' in 'kindred inter-action', in a way that might link Girard to Levinas. A study of the Semitic roots of 'Good News' leads to relocating the Transcendent in inter-face communication.*

Multi-religious settings rapidly become the norm in our globalising society. They put Christianity in an awkward bind at the start of its third millennium. As it knows its huge historical impact to have been a mixed blessing, in many respects, it feels urged to review its confrontational relations with other traditions, notably with its co-heirs of the Abrahamic faith. Seeing itself as a social entity identifiable by its 'religion in the face of God', a view it shares with the other Semitic traditions, it senses the need to give this a fresh (third) reading, in dialogue with fellow believers, and in search of the ancient insights on what this face-to-face may entail.<sup>1</sup> [ 1 ] In these pages, I shall turn to Africa not so much to analyze how these conflicts multiply on its soil, or to study the African roots of the Semitic traditions, but more modestly, to see if some of its insights may help turn that confrontation into a true con-frontation, in the sense of a face-to-face, by shedding new light on some key concepts.

Evangelising, the Qur'an and facial marks.

The famous verse in the Imran Surah (Q 3:19) that claims Islam to be the true religion (*din*) before God, is thought to specifically target the Christians. This text is used in countless disputes on which group membership is the right one, if one is to be in the right when facing the Judge, on the Last Day. This emotional rivalry has by no means run its course, even though the protagonists may often accept a theoretical equivalence of Muhammad's message and what the Qur'an calls the *Injil* (Gospel). Accusing each other of having misunderstood the sacred books, both parties, in their

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<sup>1</sup> [ 1 ] Authors like S. Huntington (1995) decry the growing division of the world by religious groupings and their vile rhetorics. This politicized situation affects Africa, in particular. It seems to betray a semantic rift between the noun 'religion' meaning only social bonding, and the adjective 'religious' that points to (private) spiritual attitudes? Many influences have profoundly modified the social contents to the noun. Instead of marking the sacred *versus* the profane, it rather denotes membership of ideological groups. If W. Cantwell Smith may have been right in 1964 (p.76) to argue that Muslim and even pre-Islamic Arabic thought had a word (*din*) corresponding with the English idea of 'religion' of his days, this would no longer apply, due to the political coloring of the term. In fact, neither as private preference, nor as social belonging religion matches the Arabic *din*. On the difference between Muslim and Western uses of the word religion, see also Talal Asad, 1993.

best moments of mutual respect, claim to share a largely identical vision. Most eloquently, one finds this in the well-known Vatican II text of *Nostra aetate* on the common grounds with Muslims as well as in numerous papal texts. But there remains the uneasy hermeneutical question, whether the two actually mean the same by what, at face value, seems shared concepts.

I wish to scrutinise the concepts in our title and subtitle, in an attempt to go beyond that wrong-footed notion of religious belonging, which is commonly associated with them. I take facial marks as a first focus. But rather than lingering on the extensive anthropological literature about this cultural feature, I take it as a pointer to highlight the ambiguity of religious study at present. How do we assess the amazing ease with which both Christianity and Islam take the Jewish lead in speaking about God's face? What to think of al-Ashari's theology adamantly taking this kind of attributes of God beyond the level of metaphor, holding that God does have a face, hand or finger?<sup>2</sup> [ 2 ] Are we allowed to link this view to Levinas' ethical thought, and see the face of the 'other' as the gateway to the Infinite, understood as an unconditioned appeal? Is this congruous with the social role of ancient corporal scars, that mark a person's identity, by signifying a link to a tribal deity or ancestral code? Are facial marks the visual signs of 'religion in the face of God'? Although we may eventually come close to that position, a profound purifying of some concepts may be needed, in the meantime.

To link 'religion in face of God' to tribal face marks is less rash than may seem, given our common perceptions. 'Religion' - allegedly derived from the Latin verb *religare* (tie)- is commonly taken to be about 'linking' us, humans, to spiritual forces, figures of our collective representations (beliefs, laws, rituals), that presumably intervene in our worldly affairs. The facial marks, that link people to their clan, also designate the adherence to their gods. They are visible signifiers of the deities' grip on their society. In various guises, Durkheim's claim that the elementary form of religion consists in the totemic unity of social groups with their collective spirit runs through most, if not all current ideas about religion.<sup>3</sup> [ 3 ] 'Religion in the face of God' has become synonymous with fidelity to a deity one's group pays allegiance to.<sup>4</sup> [ 4 ] In fact, the sociological phrase 'religious belonging' has become all but tautologous, as religion is deemed to be the 'link' marking a god's lordship over a people and the latter's submissive stewardship, which that god is to judge some (Last) day. The immobile eternity of that divine face - even when it is reflected in a human image (of a Son) - reads as a unilateral law and transcendental imperative, mediated through the community's leadership and ritual order. This face-to-face bondage has put an indelible mark on millennia of religious faith, down from the Mosaic concealed appearance, where it wrote its marks in stony engravings. But were the facial marks just counterparts of written ciphers that encode the divine presence? In which sense? Let us first note that, bar circumcision, tribal marks have tended to disappear with the coming of written revelations. So, could circumcision already be a concealed transformation, hiding the deeper sense of facial marks behind a bookish rule and a political order?

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2 [ 2 ] W. Montgomery Watt (1973 p.316) points out that al-Ashari fought both the metaphorical view of these attributes (even though the precise nature is unknown) and also al-Maturidi's essentialist view, by stressing that they are mainly means of God relating to creation and human reality. See also Al-Ashari, 1953.

3 [ 3 ] See D. Nielsen 1999.

4 [ 4 ] As shown in the Hebrew expression 'walk in the face of God' (see e.g. 1 K 8:23). The close link between this ethical view and the liturgical presence before God has obviously bolstered the notion of 'religion' as 'juridical link to God'.

What concerns us, here, is the extent to which religion must be understood as a mental support for the political order.

In referring to the Qur'an and its claim about Islam being the true religion in God's face, I am not proposing to analyze the Muslim scriptures and their reading of that term. I rather take the definition of Islam as 'submission to the Transcendent' to symbolise a debatable view of what religion, and notably Abrahamic monotheism is basically about. The schools of functional analysis have, in varying modes and tonalities, opined that the essence of all religion is: to function as a mental and symbolic underpinning of the reigning order, whether this be patriarchal kin structures, chieftaincies or constitutional monarchies, with their gilded motto "In God We Trust". Irrespective whether the 'face of God' is understood in a legislative, judicial or graciously and welcoming mode, its common imagery is: humans in awe before the Transcendent, who demands their sacrifices, Intellectualist critics of the religions apart - who focus on alleged contradictory truth claims - we see the four great schools that issued from the works of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Durkheim all reduce religion to that functional role of urging submission to some societal power, of which the divine is presumed to be the symbol and founding bedrock. The Qur'an understood as a book about religious 'submission' summarises that obdurate concept.

Although, methodologically speaking, we cannot break through this view merely by a semantic study of God's face in the Qur'an or the Bible it seems helpful to pay some attention to the linguistics of the terms used in this matter. But before engaging in that exercise, we note how strongly the Abrahamic religions have held on to the typical emphasis on the face as the countenance and honour of the Lord, for which one hides and veils one's own face. Although this awe of God's face has led to rather harmful ideals of obedient submission, we may as yet discover it to be of great value, once we have understood that curtseys are not necessarily the supreme religious gestures.<sup>5</sup> [ 5 ]

#### Dis-empowering religion

Do facial marks stand for the essence of religion by symbolising the sociology of religious belonging? Is it all about social identity, under the emblem of a group's honoured divinity, who is domineering, protective, or perhaps even jealous of his throne? Is the person's facial identity defined by a religious adherence? Should the signs of that belonging take central stage in our views on religion? The growing missionary drive in various religious traditions is indeed capitalising on that notion of belonging, which we need to examine more closely. Both Islam and Christianity strongly opt for this view, whilst yet unconsciously gainsaying it, by stressing their universality and claiming to change the tribal allegiance and its facial mark into a uniform love of the transcendent God. While using the notion of adherence, they turn it against itself and thereby create conditions for vile bigotry and bloodshed. So as to see where the notion of God's face derails, we must review its link with such terms as *religion, islam, qur'an and evangelising*.

In order to get attuned to the 'anti-functional' side of religion, challenging rather than undergirding the social order, we look at some African examples. But we first note that, in this context, 'challenge' means essentially more than 'contradict'. Anthropologists mention many (semi)religious customs that challenge and yet support the ruling order. Catholic Carnivals

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<sup>5</sup> [ 5 ] Did Salomo think of awe or of familiarity, when he reminded God of David, who "lived before (before Your face" (1 K 3:6)? Which radiance is Ps 34:6 promising a face turned to God?

challenge the Lenten and Easter message, while being an integral part of it. The worldwide telling of 'trickster'-stories simultaneously attacks the moral order and yet confirms it. For, the dream-like escapades of the a-moral half-god mostly end in hilarious failures. Even witchcraft beliefs, according to scholars like Evans-Pritchard, have a positive side in enforcing courteous social contacts. And on the political level itself, it has been shown that the Divine Kingship, to which Sir James Frazer gave such notoriety, constitutes social power that is constantly and institutionally challenged. Although these phenomena, so it is claimed, point up a gap between religious customs and the forces of power, they leave social harmony largely unaffected. But the functionalist sophistry by which these features are recuperated as extra support for reigning forces does sin by temerity in minimising the crucial role of religious 'challenges'. I will now turn to a Banda example from the Central African Republic to show that the challenge is much less trivial.

While floods of dissertations try to prove age-old African forms of worship prefiguring Muslim or Christian monotheism, on the subsumed hypothesis that no society could function without a link (religion) to the 'Supreme Being', the Banda tradition seems to tell a different story. While reading missionary reports on Banda religion in preparation of my research in the area, I was surprised to find at least four different names for 'God'. Apart from the current Nzapa, which missionaries have adopted from the Sango and diffused through the area, there were three authentically Banda names in the reports, written as *Yevoro*, *Eyilingu* and *Ere*.<sup>6 [ 6 ]</sup> Instead of seeing these as a trinity of divine sovereigns, I rather noticed that the very notion of 'sovereign' was foreign to the Banda (before their political set-up was made to include a chieftaincy by the Sango name of makonji, introduced by colonials). I found that *Yevoro* was a written approximation of the word for Rain (Thunderclouds). But the other two terms are more interesting for our topic. Father Tisserand, who favoured *Ere* as theonomous term, seems to be proved right by the numerous proverbs and expressions that use this word. But he missed the true portend of the term by claiming that it had a different tone than the same term for 'thing'. In fact, the use of this term with 'zero value' - as Lévi-Strauss would say - exactly spells out where to situate the divine in the Banda set of concepts. It is the transcendent that escapes any definition: an encircling dimension which, so to say, can shoot through the real order at any spot or time, but which is not perceived as a menacing or imposing deity. Within this ambience of *Ere*, there is a spiritual entity, called *Eyilingu*, which puzzled missionaries, because they surmised its feminine connotations, without truly grasping it. This figure deserves our attention because, like *Ere*, it cannot be construed as a support of the Banda patrilineal order.

*Eyilingu's* feminine connotation does not stem from the prefix *eyi*, even though this, as a noun, means 'mother', and can certainly help us trace the peculiar 'anti-structural' dimension in Banda society. In fact, while being the epithet of the female gender, *eyi* significantly denotes anything fruitful, dominant, useful and big - as opposed to the male epithet which indicates infertility, uselessness, smallness. In this thoroughly patrilineal and patrilocal society, the word *eyi* (mother) thus means 'master, owner, boss'. Indeed, a smith, male figure par excellence, is called *eyindawo*, *eyi* of the *ndawo*, house of fire. Thus, the deity *Eyilingu* is '*eyi* of *lingu*', and this *lingu* is what comprises the truly 'anti-structural', feminine side. *Eyilingu* is of different from the Banda deities that undergird the clout of the adult males attending to their shrines, by giving them their honourable place in the village council. As a counterpart to the spiritual emblem of the patrilineal clan-membership (*yewo*), the *lingu* is passed on in a female line; but since the female line does not constitute a political (clan) entity, this *lingu*, which a mother gives to each of her children, came to be honoured as a personal guardian, counterbalancing the clan's protecting spirit. As object of a

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6 [ 6 ] The latter is pronounced as an R vocalized with a neutral vowel underscoring it.

more personalised worship, the 'master' *lingu* (*Eyilingu*) is thus a spiritual force that roots the individual, so to say, beyond his or her lineage membership in a transcendental 'womb of being'.

Leaving aside the decline of this tradition in today's Banda society, where even the clan order has been upset by a (neo)colonial framework, we may focus on the religious insights of its tradition. *Eyilingu* lodges, so to speak, in the inter-face of the patrilineal clans, in the political order's crevasses. Rather than empowering this realm. it somehow dis-empowers it. Rather than forcing people to pay curtsies to the emblems of patrilineality. it presents, together with many linguistic 'oddities', a truly structural challenge. But before analyzing this any further, we must nonetheless recognise the fully operational male grip through the *yewo* which, together with the worship of lineal ancestors and male-dominated sanctuaries, dominates everyday religious life. Although the dis-empowerment of the male order is very real, the latter is clearly allowed to seem unassailable. In that sense, 'anti-structural' is no more precise a term than calling trickster stories 'anti-moral'. Still, we value this as a counterbalance, rather than as astute means of underpinning the hierarchical order.

Before returning to the Abrahamic traditions, we must let this insight in the institutionalised 'anti-structure' enlighten our perspective. For, even the divine name *Ere* which Tisserand found in Banda sayings, is not to be aligned with the Semitic *El* (Elohim, Allah), if we define the latter as a spiritual sovereign, ruling the world and demanding submissive curtsies. While honouring *Eyilingu* as a shielding deity, the Banda see *Ere* neither as a protective nor as an authoritarian deity. The closest the Banda come to the idea of living 'in the face of *Ere*', is in divinations, which they call 'seek *tciku Ere*', (in the folk etymology meaning: seek the skin of *Ere*, or: how *Ere* is in its skin). Divinations are in effect sober examinations, almost of mathematical rigour, from which practical resolves are derived, not because *Ere* wants to be pleased this way or the other, but simply because such is the wise reaction, given the 'state of affairs'. That divinations may actually lead to the enforcement of power structures is in no way attributed to a 'will' of *Ere*, needing to be obeyed. Banda religious and ethical emotions are not aimed at *Ere*, as a deity to whom one is linked, according the usual etymology of religion: re-ligare (tie up with).<sup>7 [7]</sup> *Ere* is beyond the 'shielding' and the 'authorising'.

#### A searching religion

The imagery evoked by *Ere* is not alien to Abrahamic traditions, less so even to Judaism and Islam than to Christianity, where the emphasis on the personal link to God via the person of Jesus may blur its impact. Although Islam is usually understood as 'submission' to the God which Muhammad learned to trust, there is the strong belief that this God is at one with the order of creation. Some have indeed argued that the key concept of tawhid (unity) has led Islam to pantheism and predestination. Be that as it may, it has clearly caused a propensity to science and non-figurative art. Judaism is akin to this also, even though it stresses that Yahweh is primarily the God and Lord of a 'chosen people'. In neither case is religion to be understood as a private worship of the deity, or as adherence to the cosmological basis of the ruling power. In order to value its dis-empowering

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<sup>7 [7]</sup> See W. Eggen 1976, p.50/a-f

force, that empowers the powerless instead, we must try and rediscover the 'evangelising' thrust in some of the terms commonly used.<sup>8</sup> [ 8 ]

While we have so far taken the word 'face' as our prime focus of analysis, we shall now start from another angle, given the term's distorting and blinding prominence in the Hebrew bible and age-old doctrines.<sup>9</sup> [ 9 ] We first note a stark difference with the Banda tradition, in that we are told that seeking the face of the scriptural God never means 'soothsaying divination'. It is argued that this designates the move of religion away from impersonal and magic ritualism toward a personalised relationship, claimed to be the crucial break-through of the historical over the cyclical.<sup>10</sup> [ 10 ] But a dubious etymology of the word 'religion' may be in the background here. Whereas Cicero had opined that this word - which in old Rome denoted the various ritual practices - derived from the verb (*re-*)*legere*, a tendency grew among Christians, headed by Tertullian, to relate the word to (*re-*)*ligare*. This has stayed with us, even though any classicist knows that verbs of the first conjugation do not normally lose the -a in the derivatives (see e.g. *ligature*). That choice reflected a peculiar development in the biblical tradition. Whereas the God of Moses was primarily a protector and helper, who fought the political powers in support of the ill-organised poor, Yahweh gradually turned into the jealous God of the royal order and Jerusalem's legal establishment, with their exclusive claims. In Banda terms, this would mean a shift from the protecting *Eyilingu* to the dominance of clan deities, who would then be identified with the total order of reality *Ere*. Religion thus came to mean: adherence to the God from whom all power on earth stems. And the 'link' (*ligature*) of humans to this Source of power came to serve as the decisive image.

Before we turn again to the Banda view, we note that the link between God and the royal line appears as disputable for the Bible also. Yahweh (in 1 S 8) did indeed resent being part of the royal scheme the people's leaders requested (not to mention the Constantinian arrangement in Roman times!). The Banda also worshipped many deities of a type which, under circumstances, could develop into the royal clan god.<sup>11</sup> [ 11 ] But, if the word 'religion' is applied to them, it leads to a most revealing insight. The Banda name for deity or spirit is the same as the general word for 'tree' and for 'medicine'. The religious worship of specific deities is therefore associated, both materially and metaphorically, with the medicines derived mainly from plants (shrubs, trees). The village council comprises the (normally) male incumbents of these shrines, and the political position of these priests stems from the healing power of the respective deities without any of them becoming paramount. The authors claiming that the sacrifices at such shrines therefore tend to bolster a male (patriarchal) grip on clan structures have a point, and N. Jay's application of that argument to

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<sup>8</sup> [ 8 ] The need to profoundly revise many Christian notions in an 'evangelising' sense has recently been outlined by R. Luneau (1999).

<sup>9</sup> [ 9 ] The Semitic bi-radical root \*pn occurs no less than 2127 times in the Hebrew text, with a dominant sense of God's unapproachable majesty.

<sup>10</sup> [ 10 ] Around 1900 this opposition between the Abrahamic and other traditions was strongly emphasized. In his anti-Christian idea of the eternal return, Nietzsche opted for the cyclic view, with a reference to East-Asian religions that had grown popular in the West.

<sup>11</sup> [ 11 ] Anthropologists describe many examples of a deity of the chief's clan turned into the nation's supreme god.

ancient Israel is generally well taken.<sup>12</sup> [12] But an analysis the underlining logic also holds another message.

The worship of those deities - in the Latin sense of 'religion' (observance) - is associated in a specific way with *Ere* (while there seems to be no such link to *Eyilingu*). The deities are embodiments of interventions by *Ere*, as bringer of both mishap and healing. Asked about this, the Banda specify that there are countless deities in the spiritual domain of *Ere*, but one would not normally experience their existence, if it were not for *ama*. This word literally means 'mouth', but metonymically also disputes, fights, disunity.<sup>13</sup> [13] What this tells us, is that the religious observances are not so much meant to back up social power, but rather to neutralise the social discords which - commonly - are the outcome of people striving for power over each other. In other words, rather than supporting power lines, they are indeed (half-heartedly) curtailing them. The followers of a particular religion (in the old Latin sense) might at first glance seem followers of that shrine and its dignitary. But subconsciously, they know that their link (religion, in our sense) to the deity is primarily a critique of themselves, of the priest and indeed of the deity as well. That is: a critique of *the ama* that should not be. These deities emerging from the realm of *Ere* are therefore the ambiguous signifiers of social strife: their worship is a symbolic search to remedy the *ama*.<sup>14</sup> [14]

Although I wish to focus on African and Semitic data, we may briefly relate this to the etymology that derives religion from *legere* (gather, read), rather than *ligare* (link), to offer quite a new perspective. Heidegger's philosophy often stresses that the root of *legere* (and the Greek word *logos*) primarily means 'gathering and integrating of traces of meaning'. But applying this to 'religion', one must beware of concluding that it is all about a search for truth and intellectual insights. J. Derrida, following Cicero, has recently turned Heidegger's views in an ethical direction, but without succumbing again to the old idea of religion as submission to a pre-existing rule or deity.<sup>15</sup> [15] He rather seems to join Banda notions that religion is primarily a committed search to gather the seeds of unity, beyond *ama*, and not a link to some deity. It is a commitment, with the help of the deities, to find (*re-legere*) a social harmony which makes it unnecessary for them to appear, speak and disturb human plans. Instead of being the support of political power, then, religion is, in fact, a critique of any power structure in as far as the latter causes discord and subordination.

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<sup>12</sup> [12] See N. Jay 1996 and W. Eggen 1999.

<sup>13</sup> [13] In W. Eggen 1976 and 1999

<sup>14</sup> [14] This view is not unlike the thesis R. Girard has been advocating, ever since 1972, arguing that religion centers in sacrifices that offer an oblique solution for insolvable social tensions.

<sup>15</sup> [15] See J. Derrida "Faith and Knowledge; the sources of Religion at the Limits of Reason Alone" in J. Derrida & G. Vattimo 1998, p.1-78). For Cicero's etymology and a wider discussion of the term, see W. Cantwell Smith, 1964. Note that a similar idea is present in the Dutch '*lezen*'; but what we are after is to be distinguished from the 'gathering' the Manichaeans mean by the verb *sullegein*, the re-collecting of the scattered luminous particles of the individual's soul. See H-P. Puech, "The Concept of Redemption in Manichaeism", in *Eranos Jahrbuch* 1968, p.254.

## A call to *slm*

Defining religion thus calls to mind the prophets of the Abrahamic traditions. The setting in which Muhammad received the qur'anic revelation, in particular, should for ever urge the Muslim community to this search of harmony and a true abhorrence of any power play. The previously quoted Q 3:19, therefore, calls for a few remarks, if it is claimed to mean that true *din* before God is Islam. Leaving aside the extensive studies of the pre-islamic use of terms like *din*, we may concentrate on the core notions of *Islam* and *Qur'an*.<sup>16</sup> [16] While Islam is commonly translated as 'submission to God', very few authors fail to note its linguistic link with the Semitic tri-radical \*slm and its affinity with the Hebrew word *shalom* (peace). The biblical semantics of that word is well-known. But we ought to look at the logic commonly used in this context. Muslims tend to claim that submission to God and the order He reveals through the line of prophets culminating in Muhammad, is the sure way to peace. Summarised in the concept of *tawhid*, God's unity of being and purpose in words and works, is deemed to be the true warrant of peace for the believers submitting to God's revelation. According to the orthodox al-Ashari tradition this divine word even precedes all creation, being eternally coded in the heavenly *umm-al-kitab* (Mother Book).

In this wording, 'peace' seems the outcome, rather than the essence of Islamic submission. Noting this, many Muslim scholars, dismayed by offensive rhetorics of populist revivalism and eager to promote a sincere cooperation with peoples of other traditions, have started to examine - in view of the global need for cooperation and a common religious reply to the present ills - the hermeneutic line that urges them to see 'peace' as a criterion, rather than the fruit of *dawa* (mission) and *jihad* (sacred struggle).<sup>17</sup> [17] They emphasize that awareness of the causes of strife and injustice should drive the religious mind (*din*) to indignation and to prophetic commitment. That means that stirring up any form of social conflict is counter to the *dawa*, and that the political use of the notion of 'belonging' as discretionary tool should be ruled out. Peace is not an eschatological reward, but rather the condition and heart of *dawa*. Clearly, this would agree with the Banda insights mentioned above. Yet, others object that this contradicts the missionary command, in both the qur'anic and biblical message, which enjoins to go out and bear witness. They hold that the very etymology of Qur'an militates against that view. For, does that very word not reflect God's order: "*qara'a*, recite My word to you"?

It is not for me to officiate on the etymology of the word Qur'an. But, even if we follow this version, we note a curious aspect that reminds us of what was said about the etymology of 'religion'.<sup>18</sup> [18] Al-Ashari's classic belief in the uncreated nature of the Qur'an may guide us, precisely where it tends to take texts literally. For, the Mother Book appears not so much as an entity, eternally present in God's sight, so to speak, but rather as a pre-creational act of God who, before ever shaping any material or celestial beings, is seen composing the Book - if this imagery

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<sup>16</sup> [16] Here again, it cannot be our purpose to analyze the massive literature on these to notions, let alone to teach Muslims how to understand their tradition. My purpose is to trace an affinity with a prophetic line which Islam and *Injil* (Gospel) might share with some African insights.

<sup>17</sup> [17] Among them, I wish to mention in particular the lucid study by F. Esack, 1997.

<sup>18</sup> [18] Noting that Qur'an and its commonly associated *qara'a*, understood as 'reading', are not properly Arabic, some have linked Qur'an to *qarana* (to tie); others see it as a Syriac loanword.

is allowed - by the act of *qara'a*. In Q 75:17-18, *qara'a* is used in unison with the common verb for collecting, saying that God collects and reads the revelation. Although the translation of these verses varies greatly, there is the general image of God collating the Book by acts of selecting and spelling out. The verb *qara'a* may thus be rendered either as 'reciting the Divine Word' or as 'spelling out the signs of God's Order'. The two meanings are clearly akin, and join what we have said about religion deriving from *re-legere* (collecting the seeds of harmony). It is as if the prophet, and indeed every believer, is urged to join in the eternal, pre-creational gesture of God, by searching for the ciphers of peace (*slm*).

### Seeking God's (s)kindom

If we agree that a critique of the social power structure is an essential part of religion's role, and that the etymology of both the Latin *religio* and the Arabic *qara'a* comply with Banda insight in religious practices, as an urge to 'collect' the seeds of harmony, beyond the social conflicts (*ama*) that are the inevitable correlates of that power, we may now return to the notion of 'the face of God' and ask how it relates to the search of *slm*, the Semitic word for harmony and wholeness?<sup>19</sup> [19]

Coming from the Banda perspective, I was struck by Van der Woude stating that, in the Old Testament, to seek the face of God never means divination.<sup>20</sup> [20] Are we indeed to reject any semantic parallel between 'face of God' and the Banda term for divination, 'seeking the skin of Ere'?<sup>21</sup> [21] This question refers us to a similar and even more categorically statement, by Bratsiotis, saying that the two meanings of the triradical \*bsr (skin and good news) are only related by homonymy.<sup>22</sup> [22] Since this radical is rendered in Greek as 'evangelion', the point strikes at the heart of our theme. Bratsiotis seems to be backed by most authors and by the biblical trend to use the former meaning mainly negatively. The skin and flesh appear widely as opposites of the spiritual, and never as attributes of Yahweh or anything to do with His transcendence. This

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19 [19] The first meaning of the triradical \*slm, from which both the Hebrew *shalom* and the Arabic *islam* stem, is given as 'wholeness, completeness'. Note that the 'shin' and 'sin' value of in this radical can shift either way between Semitic languages, since originally (as in Syriac) there was only one letter.

20 [20] In TLOT Vol.2 p. 1010. On this score, the author backs Reindl against Westermann.

21 [21] As we have seen, translating Ere by God is not very correct; and the Banda in using the expression *tcikure* do not openly think of a skin (*tciku*) of God (Ere), no more so than the English think of a carpenter or a taylor, when they certify something as true by saying: 'it fits'. Still, as P. Sloterdijk points out (1989, ch. 5), the underlying sense of such expressions must be taken seriously. Ceratin is that African and Asians normally perform divinations with great sincerity and religious hones, even though monotheistic believers tend to despise them.

22 [22] In TDOT 1975, Vol.2 p.317. While also treating these two meanings separately, W. Gesenius (in *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Oxford U.P. 1979 p.142) attaches great value to the root value which they seem to have in common, namely: rub, smooth the face (!). M. Jastrow (in *A dictionary of Targumim, Talmud Babli, Yerusami and Midrashic literature*, New York, The Judaic Press p.199) relates this to such values as sweat, pleasant, ripe, warm. well-looking.

negative symbol of what is seen as both estranged from and hostile to God is typically identified as 'uncircumcised flesh'. Bratsiotis stresses that the presence of the triradical \**bsr* all through the OT (but most often in the Pentateuch and notably in circles around the priestly Leviticus and Ezekiel) prevents us from tracing its historical development through Israel's religious conscious. Yet, it must be noted that the Qumran sect came to use it mainly for mortality and sinfulness (guilty flesh, evil flesh, spirit of flesh, etc) and that this trend also marked the NT and the Rabbinic traditions.<sup>23</sup> [23] Looking through the wide scope of meanings of \**bsr* in the OT, one cannot fail to note that this stress on hostility to the spiritual and divine seems to have been the outcome of an ideological development, which led to the paradox of \**bsr* as 'evangelic good news' becoming the religious antipode of what would seem the same \**bsr*, meaning body (as sinfulness, frailty and mortality).

This clearly calls for further study, since our tri-radical is present in both senses throughout the West-Semitic language group, notably in Arabic.<sup>24</sup> [24] These Semitic uses of the tri-radical reveal a striking affinity between the values of 'joyful, pleasant looking' and 'bodily appearance'. The Arabic is most decisive on this point, by using the tri-radical not only for 'humanity' (in its valued, positive sense), but also for 'joyfulness', 'being delighted' and 'good news', from which such words as *tabshiri* (mission) are derived.<sup>25</sup> [25] As we return to the biblical text, we find \**bsr* used for 'human being' as such, but also for fertility (even euphemistically indicating the genitals both of men and women) and, most remarkably, for offspring and kindred. So, we notice a discrepancy between the (more recent?) emphasis on un-godly frailty and the (basic?) notion of

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<sup>23</sup> [23] See J.N. Oswalt in TLOT Vol.1 p.292. Ezekiel's drive for what has been called an 'unwordly spiritualism' clearly contributed to this trend. The innumerable NT-studies on *sarx* (flesh) generally seem to take for granted that the \**bsr* behind this is different from what translates as '*evangelion*'. But a semantic link between them does appear even in Ezekiel (Ez 37:8), where *the eschatological 'Good News' is symbolised by the flesh (bsr) of God-given vitality being put on the dry bones.*

<sup>24</sup> [24] An indication in favour of seeing the two as just one triradical may be the fact that the middle radical in both meanings shifted to the Arabic 'shin' from the Hebraic 'sin'-value. See also note 18. In Hausa and Swahili, two wide-spread African vehicular languages, we find the 'Good News'-value in *bishara* and *bashira*, adopted from Arabic, beside words derived from *Injil*, such as *Injilu*, *Linjana* and *Injili*. The Hausa popular etymology of *bishara* seems to ignore the Arabic root.

<sup>25</sup> [25] E.W. Lane in his great *Arabic-English Lexicon* (1863 Vol.I p.207-208) summarises the detailed semantic analysis of this root in four interrelated meanings:

- A) skin, surface, (removable scales), strip, raze;
- B) announcing an event that may change complexion;
- C) be in bodily (also sexual) contact with a person;
- D) be made happy (also pregnant?). The cheerful and radiant countenance expressing healthy joy seems to be the core of this cluster. But it has clearly negative aspects as well, for it can be used to say that the land has been razed by locusts or an enemy. But Lane does not seem to believe in two separate radicals.

human existence, its health and fertility. So, the question arises what made theologians emphasize the un-godly, and the stark distinction between what to a neutral observer must appear as two interrelated meanings of the same radical? In other words: why was the Good News defined as a remedy to the human body's enmity to God's shining countenance? A dubious trend seems to surface here, which calls for a truly prophetic act to save the 'skindom' dimension of \*bsr, viewed as the God-given cheerful unity of humans, who receive their identity by openness to each other. Can a religion that opposes God's Good News to this 'skindom' be 'true religion in the face of God' (Jm 1:27)?

Nobody, having frequented Semitic circles or countries, can have missed the impressive habit of people stroking their face after prayers, at visits to holy places or when meeting a gracious person or event. As sign of the shining radiance, their graceful face is unmistakably reminiscent of the cluster of meanings we have come to associate with \*bsr. By contrast, an awesome sense of having to 'face up' to a divine transcendence marks the idea of religious belonging, and tends to rob the divine of a crucial aspect. But we must go one decisive step further, still, by noting that \*bsr, in its old Semitic meaning, stands for the highly valued human fertility and kinship. Here, we perceive an even starker discrepancy, since emphasis on the transcendence of God's face was undoubtedly linked to the clan system, the centralised worship, the temple splendour and the messianic unity. Under the same linguistic sign, a spiritual title to grace came thus to gainsay the genetic title, and humans were taught uncompromisingly to 'belong' to the divine realm. This shows in the prescribed consecration of the first male child to God, a ritual that amounts to the sacrificial offering of human fertility. The haunting Isaac episode in Gn 22 leaves no doubt about its religious meaning, in this context: children are to be God's offspring. The logic of that gesture and its link with the notion of 'religious belonging', can hardly be lost on anyone who has come to understand the ritual logic of *Eyilingu*, which lodges in the inter-clanic space, opening up, rather than restricting kinship ties.

Seeing the Father (Jn 14:9)

The link to kinship is of crucial importance. Feminist theologians, attacking the patriarchal tendencies in the Abrahamic religions, have rightly criticised the sacrificial and royal imagery, which has pushed kinship rules towards an ever starker male-oriented and religion-controlled system. By highlighting the Banda concepts surrounding *Eyilingu* and *Ere*, I do not seek to join the craze of proving a feminine side to God. If anything, even in Banda terms, we ought rather to value a pre-lapsarian condition, where sex-difference was 'unknown', as humans had not yet learned to use the 'knowledge of good and evil' for that discriminatory and disavowing attitude toward each other. Still, I will follow feminist parlance, as coined by the theologians who abandoned the phrase God's Kingdom for 'kindom', and I propose to link this phrasing with the foregoing to speak of God's messianic '(s)kindom'.<sup>26</sup> [26]

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<sup>26</sup> [26] The more common choice for 'reign' may solve a gender issue, by referring to the neutral *regnum* (and by its phonetic link to the feminine '*reine*'?), it leaves the problem of the power imagery. The term 'kindom' could obviously read as a reference to the notion of 'Family of God', which the African Synod promoted as the best ecclesiological imagery. But in this case, a critical scrutiny is required, if it is not to result in male leaders ruling everyone in the Lord's name. The term '(s)kindom' implies strictly egalitarian and holistic exchanges.

In regard of Jesus' evangelic vision, much stress has been put on 'liberation' based on his mission statement of Lk 4:18. Leaving aside the question who are its objects (the poor, *ptoochoi*), we may consider two related questions: what is the position of the evangelised and just what is the Good News? In Lk 7:22, Jesus tells John the Baptist to view the '*evangelising of the ptoochoi*' as a messianic sign. But like the grammar of this English phrase, the Greek one is also ambivalent. Is the Greek verb a passive or a middle form? In the latter case, the *ptoochoi* are actually the evangelisers. The official translations opt for the passive form. But liberation theologians are justified to take the opposite line and claim that the poor are themselves the carriers of the Good News, when they take courage and seek for deliverance from among themselves. The problem seems compounded by the fact that *evangelizoo* (the verb's active form) is so rarely used in the NT. One occurrence, though, is most revealing. In Rv 10:7, God is said to have given the Good News to the prophets. However, throughout prophetic history, down to Muhammad, this means that God has turned them into bearers of the Good News. Or, saying it differently: by brightening their faces, He turns them into radiant distributors and fertile channels of that new life.<sup>27</sup> [27] As we study Jesus' answer to John, we note that Luke (like Mt 11:5) uses once more the text of Trito-Isaiah (Is 61:1), where it says that the coming one is anointed to *bsr annawim*, to restore their (s)kindom. Here, the true meaning of 'religion in the face of God' is emerging, in what could be termed an inter-active, energizing radiance.<sup>28</sup> [28]

If evangelising means helping a person to turn into a 'body' transparent with God's order and shining with His radiance, i.e. making the *ptoochoi* (*annawim*) turn into prophets and bearers of the divine word, this should permit them to say: who sees me (in radiant transparency), sees the Father (Jn 14:9). But by quoting this highly christologised johannine text, we land in the thick of the strife, we mentioned in the beginning. Has the text not served as the linchpin for the Christian exclusivist claims, which incited Muslims, and more recently Hindus and Buddhists, to launch similar claims? Is this not exactly the *topos* where the opposing parties clash, when Christians pretend that 'religion in the face of God' means to live in adherence to Jesus, who is the Splendour (Word, Image) of the Father?

Evangelising religion in the face of God (Jm 1:27)

Studying this in the present quandary, after two millennia of Christendom, I wish to argue that the Johannine texts have gone through two christological readings that left a rigidified form of 'religion

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<sup>27</sup> [27] The grammatical difficulty is further compounded by the fact that the middle form takes the dative (as in Rm 1:15), whereas the active takes the accusative (as in Rv 10:7). This makes Lk 7:22 (=Mt 11:5) ambiguous, because of the nominative, which could be the subject both of a passive or of a middle form. The grammatical option for the passive is therefore justified, since Lk 7:22 would otherwise be a middle form without an object, which would be quite unusual. But semantically the other option is operative in the background.

<sup>28</sup> [28] If *\*bsr* connotes the positively radiant appearance of the 'evangelised' person, we note a doubling of the 'messianic anointment'. Jesus is anointed to anoint (*bsr*: smooth the faith of) the *ptoochoi*. A similar doubling we find in the Greek and Latin versions of the following line, where Jesus says to be sent to send the captives away free. Bringing the Good News, therefore, is entering into an inter-active union of freedom beyond the strains of dividing rivalry (*ama*).

in the face of God', due to an outright identification of Jesus with God.<sup>29</sup> [29] A new (third) start seems to be called for, to 'evangelise' (Luneau) this notion.

The first millennium generally stressed the monotheist faith, viewing Jesus as exalted in God's glory, in Whose name he was to pass judgment (Jn 5:22; Mt 25). During this period, Muhammad prophetically challenged the ever-growing danger of a politicised 'idolatry' turning Jesus into an object of worship as the true focus of religion in God's face. Various historical reasons caused the second millennium, right from the beginning, to shift sight from this exalted Christ to his embodiment in the earthly church. Could this be the true reason for Greek Orthodoxy breaking away? Be that as it may, its criticism in junction with the Muslim challenge drove the West ever further to emphasizing the presence of God's grace (and face) in the hierarchical church. So, Western Christendom, after having assimilated the treasures of knowledge that came its way from Antiquity via Muslim scholars, came to focus on the graced individual who, as the baptised member of Christ's body, was entitled to all power and knowledge, here below and above. Many Muslims have justifiably argued that the Western technical and political advances were thus built on a wrong perception of the immanence of God, which made people pretend to be living in union with the Almighty simply by being a member of Christ's body. This notion was bound to breed imperialistic and technocratic arrogance.<sup>30</sup> [30] So, we are urged to ask if an alternative evangelic reading of the Johannine texts can be elaborated, along the line suggested above.

No one, surely, believes John's Gospel to mean that, in affirming unity with the Father, Jesus was bragging about his metaphysical excellency? But although Christians knew these to be words of humility, rather than temerity, they have 'theologised' them exactly in the opposite sense, stressing the divine honour of Jesus (Jn 5:23). And next they claimed, for individual believers, a share in that metaphysical union of Christ with the Father, through the sacramental mechanism of baptism. 'Religion in the face of God' thus became, in the end, a sublime invitation to 'be oneself'. Even the excruciating pains of anxiety about one's sinfulness, which drove Luther almost to despair, were basically about missing out on that excellency, which truly was one's heritage through baptism.<sup>31</sup> [31] But if boasting is not Jesus' aim, in his identification with the Father, how can the foregoing help us further?

Sociologically speaking, Jn 5:22 on the Son's judicial power has served as the key text, albeit in a short-sighted reading. Its parallel in Mt 25 should tell any serious believer that the Son is the judge,

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<sup>29</sup> [29] The Johannine tradition centers in this enigmatic word which was to lead Jesus to his death (see Jn 5:18), as it did with the Sufi hero Hallaj, who used a similar phrase. Turning of this message into a 'politicized' claim clearly has perverted its meaning.

<sup>30</sup> [30] Here many Muslim authors could be mentioned; I wish to mention especially the murdered Palestinian Ismail al-Faruqi, who worked so hard for an dialogue in which these historical wrongs were courageously addressed.

<sup>31</sup> [31] Despite Nietzsche's wry criticism of the debilitating Christian views on sin, I think that the true problem was not the undermining of self-esteem, but rather the hyperbolizing of it. The psychotic concern with sin which marked medieval Christianity (see J. Delumeau), arose from a doctrine on Christ's *hephapax* (once-for-all) redemptive work that made believers see salvation as something to avail oneself of. Even Luther's stress on faith retained an auto-redemptive, quasi-promethean streak. One was to focus on what one already was.

only by embodying the criteria of the judgment and by being true to the evangelic plan. If one accepts Jesus' propheticism, his identification with the Father must denote a claim to be realising what he preached: God's plan. There is not enough the space here to elaborate this point. But in line with the above, I suggest that Jesus, rather than posturing as the messianic embodiment of God's royal glory (kingdom) and demanding our adherence, urged us to see God in his human face.<sup>32</sup> [ 32 ] Instead of making us join a divine kingdom that depreciated kinship, he showed the true sense of \*bsr to consist in human persons bodily opening up to each other, as a 'kindom', in which to find their true identity. Instead of calling religion a private link to a Supreme Being, he showed it to mean gathering (*re-legere*) of the graceful elements that heal the people's power-induced conflicts and diseases. Rather than exacting the submission to an eternal bookish rule, he joined God's search for words (*qara'a*) that bring the universe to its intended harmony. Rather than seeking God's face by divinations, aiming at power and control, he saw knowledge of the Father (Jn 10:5) as a practical involvement in liberating the *ptoochoi* (annawim).<sup>33</sup> [ 33 ] He accepted to be sent to send free (Lk 4:18; Is 61:1), not to claim adherence and membership.

### Con-fronting the challenge of inter-face

If one were to interpret the foregoing as a fuzzy attempt to defuse religious rivalry by a vague irenic idea of humanity's universal (s)kindom, we need to recall that the Johannine Jesus referred to his Father, first, in a blatantly combatant context. In Jn 2:16, he is engaged in a purifying drive to restore the temple to its religious perfection.<sup>34</sup> [ 34 ] His words about bringing fire and strife, even to families, should also defuse any false religious pacifism. On the other hand, it is clear that his purifying act did not intend to glorify a spiritualised ritualism to supersede kinship ties.<sup>35</sup> [ 35 ] It rather aimed at creating a sacred space for human inter-action to become itself recognisable as God's temple (glory, *shekinah*).

This implies rejecting any proselytic rivalry that prevails by preaching the soul's individual link to a Saviour God. And yet, it encourages *dawa*, *jihad* and mission, understood as a "zeal for your house" (Jn 2:17; Ps 69:9). While discouraging any rudeness with religious affiliations or buildings in God's name, 'evangelism' should foster a committed struggle for people's opening up to the

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<sup>32</sup> [ 32 ] If this sounds like Levinas' central theme, I wish to point out that he says both much more and much less.

<sup>33</sup> [ 33 ] See W.Eggen, *Onze Vader die de ander zigt*, Aalsmeer, Luypen 1993. The Lord's payer is primarily a practical commitment to see the Father's presence in the other.

<sup>34</sup> [ 34 ] This is part of a movement, now known as the Temple Restoration Gestalt (TRG), which continued from the Maccabees down the Zealots and beyond, and which also appears in the Synoptics. For a summary, see P. Staples "Ritual Combat in the Gospels and Josephus: a New Methodological Approach" in *Social Compass* 46 (1999) 4 p.481-492. If both Jn 12:1 and the controversial Jn 8:1-11 are indeed to be placed in that ambience, they show how radically Jesus changes the religious context a.o. by restoring women's proper role.

<sup>35</sup> [ 35 ] Mk 7:10-13 vehemently opposes the Pharisaic tendency to define "walking in God's face" in purely ritual terms as if the religious community could replace kin relations. Other texts seem to contradict this, only if we define 'unity to Jesus' ritually, in opposition to human love. But that contradicts the Gospel message

(s)kindom in which 'religion in the face of God' equals entering into a human inter-face, in search of ciphers of true communication. The messianic anointment thus becomes inter-active through a 'divining' quest for means to oust politicised conflicts (*ama*) that result from the ill-conceived 'knowledge of good and evil' (Gn 3:22).<sup>36 [36]</sup> As a religious project, to retrieve prophetic religion after "God's death", I propose to use 'kin' and 'skin' as ciphers for intercommunication and to locate the divine immanence in the inter-face. This con-frontational view of 'religion before God', this combined facing of actual challenges, seems best expressed by Jm 1:27, the Hebrew translation of which reads: "service (*'abdh*) in the face (*lpnei*) of God". In qur'anic terms, this approach should unite the Abrahamic beliefs by defining the service of God as the care of each other, notably of orphans and the needy (Q 2:83). Rather than a soft-touch charity, this speaks of an inter-active competitive struggle (see Q 5:48). And instead of viewing it as the shrinking of God's kingdom into some introvert type of (s)kindom, we are to see this as the first step to break out of the egocentric inertia (P. Virilio), by rediscovering a vigorous and true exteriority. In *re-defining 'religion in the face of God' as seeking God's (s)kindom* we do not buy wholesale the present commercialised and eroticised body-cult, nor locate the divine immanence in the *ego*. Rather, we fight the politicised verticality of religion, by locating both the transcendence and the immanence in the face-to-face con-frontation, which puts religion in a polar opposition to the social power games.

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<sup>36 [36]</sup> Could it be that African or Asian religions' practice of divination make them less inclined to aggressive proselytism, because of its sense of inter-active search for the divine? If this suggestion seems anti-biblical in a context which proposes to read kingdom by (s)kindom, and could even be viewed as Nietzsche's dysangel (in 1979 p.151), we must note the latter's awful deformation in Nazi-thoughts on Aryan kinship and in the present day commercialised body worship.

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