

## **European thinking climate as a challenge for Islamic theology**

*Post-Christian vs. Christian thinking*

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### **Introduction**

The Muslim population is increasing in Europe. Islamic theological training and imam education that take place in the European context are a very hot topic in European discussion. Often asked question is what really happens when traditional Islamic theology faces different European educational, philosophical and methodological approaches along with all the challenges and demands of the modern European lifestyle. In this presentation I will try to open Christian and post-Christian thinking as I seek to describe the thought climate where European Muslims are living.

Emeritus president of Turkish Ministry of Religious Affairs professor Ali Bardakoğlu is asking very similar questions. Professor Bardakoğlu sees that Muslim countries have three options as they face the demands of modernity: 1) They can close the windows firmly and assume that no such a thing as modernity exists 2) They can do what many western Churches do today: surrender and give in to all the demands of the modern world or 3) they can take seriously their own traditional faith, compare it to the demands of the modern world and then chart a road map.<sup>1</sup>

In my opinion professor Bardakoğlu sees the situation very clearly. His analysis regarding Western Churches is also very descriptive. European Churches have had to choose between these three. The alternative they choose will determine the challenges they will face.

### **European worldviews in change**

There is no such a thing as a single European worldview or even modern thinking. The whole history from ancient times until to today effects today's Europe. We cannot talk European worldview, but we can talk about trends and worldviews that are common in Europe. However I have to apologize that to be able to say at least something in this short presentation, I have to cut a long story short and make things look simpler than they may be.

The enlightenment and the scientific revolution have meant a radical change in European thinking. Although dogmatic materialism that was an important part of scientism and logical empiricism have been shown to be philosophically impossible projects, materialistic basic assumptions are still playing a vital role in western scientific discourse. Still in many cases the scientific worldview that relies on naturalistic methods is seen to be the only valid starting point that science generally allows. However during the last decades philosophers have pointed out philosophical weaknesses in this naturalistic paradigm. Different kinds of relativistic and autonomous approaches are challenging the epistemological basic assumptions of naturalism. It is obvious that naturalism hasn't had much to say about moral and values for a long time. It seems like dialogical pluralism is becoming the commonly accepted starting point especially for social sciences. This kind of progress fits well in the post-modern era where many truths are living side by side without disturbing each other too much.

Even if Europe is becoming more pluralistic, it is still possible to recognize some general trends in the European thought climate. French sociologist Jacques Ellul (1921-1994) gives a useful point of view that helps us understand this matter. Ellul describes the process where Europe moved from Christian era to post-Christian era.<sup>2</sup> During the Christian era Jesus Christ as an incarnated part of the Holy Trinity was in the

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<sup>1</sup> Bardakoğlu, Ali 2009,70-72, Religion and Society. New Perspectives from Turkey. Ankara:Publications of Presidency of Religious Affairs.

<sup>2</sup> Ellul, Jacques 1975. New Demons (original Les Nouveaux Possedes 1973), Translated by C. Hopkin. New York:The Seabury Press

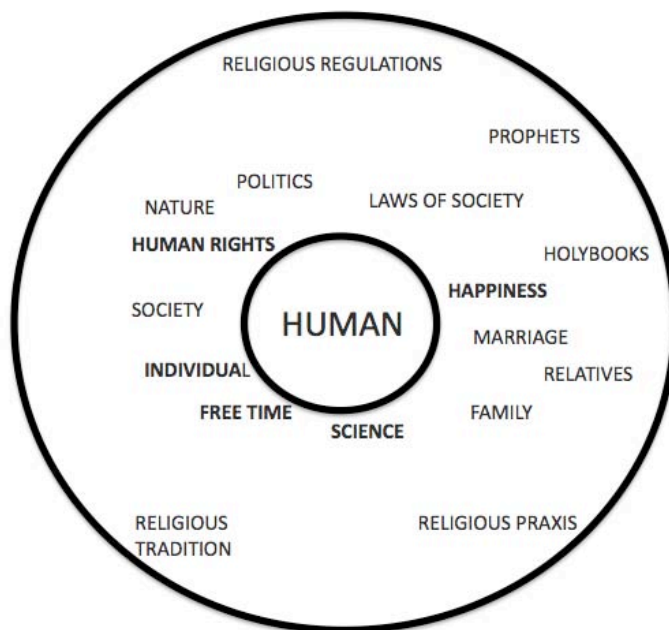
centre of the history. In the post-Christian era Jesus Christ and the church are marginalized and seem to have very limited opportunities to contribute to society and people's life generally.<sup>3</sup>

The preachers of the post-Christian era proclaim a new worldview that is free from things that were seen as "holy" before. In the Christian era holy things were for instance God, Holy Books, Church, absolute moral truths, the Christian concept of family and gender (which for instance included discussion about divorce and homosexuality). Holiness in Christianity also included the Christian understanding of the value of human life that is not dependent upon on circumstances (for instance discussion about euthanasia and abortion) etc.

### Post-Christian era's human centred worldview

However Ellul argues that holiness has not disappeared, only its goals have changed. Ellul lists holy things of post-Christian area:

- 1) Man is the measure of everything. Everything is evaluated in relation to the human being. Everything that is meaningful happens between birth and death. The highest value and goal in life is to be happy.
- 2) Man is autonomous and responsible only for himself. Man decides what is good and what is bad. There is no other source of hope or truth, even when we are dealing with suffering and death of man himself.
- 3) Man is rational. (Although man can not find rational reasons to approve what is existing and what is not existing, man thinks that he has a rational reason to abandon religion, objective moral laws etc. )
- 4) Man is good or at least free to choose between good and bad. Normal is good and normal is what most people approve.



#### *Post-Christian Human centred worldview*

*(When man is in the centre, individual, human rights, happiness etc. are close to the centre. Science, that is seen as a saviour of man from old superstitious beliefs is also close to the centre. Holy books, prophets etc. are far away from the centre.)*

Although we live in a post-Christian era in Europe, it does not mean that religion and religious man have disappeared. Religiousness just finds new forms. In post-Christian era the independence of man is considered

<sup>3</sup> Ellul 1975, 15

holy. If God was in the centre in Christian era, in post-Christian era man has replaced God. This is also a religious statement, although very few recognize it.

In post-Christian era modern man formulates a worldview and a new religion that are a possible way of living in the current context. Their faith is rarely rational. For instance if we dig a little deeper into the basic assumptions of naturalism, it becomes obvious that foundations for naturalism are arbitrary judgements about essence of reality. I claim that philosophical naturalism ends up either as scepticism, which doubts every truth or constructivism and relativism, which approve all truths. Scepticism can be a useful method in science, but no one can be a pure sceptic in his everyday life. Constructivism is also a good approach in education where an active self-directing learner is the aim, but eventually constructivism is based on a relativism that is also impossible way of existing. In everyday life man has to make all the time different kinds of epistemological and ethical judgements. Without trust in lasting truths, man enters into Nietzsche's world. Nietzsche's world with absolute perspectivism and constant power games is too nihilistic and bare for most of people. People, need some truth they can hold onto. In most cases people are pragmatic. The river of life flows on and people in the western world float down with it in the middle of the stream of all the conflicting discourses and worldviews as they try to find the most workable way to be happy.

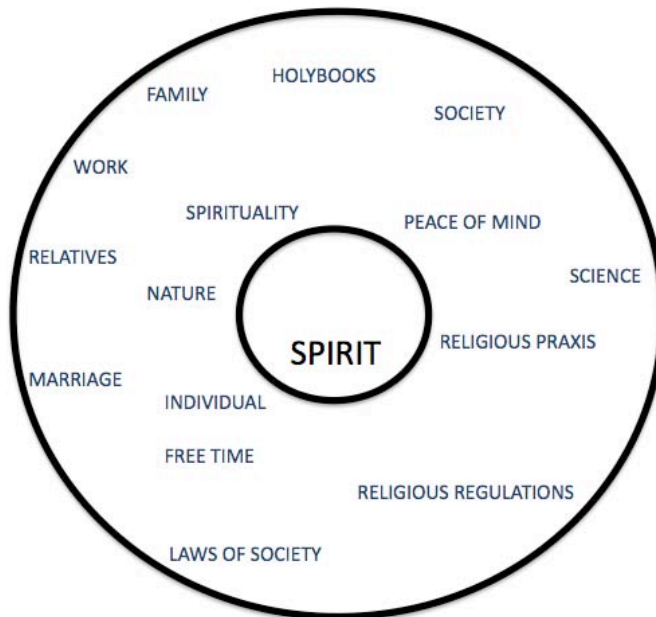
### **Post-Christian era's spirit centred worldview**

In the western world the human centred post-Christian worldview is a commonly shared perception of life. But at the same time all kinds of new spiritual movements are getting more space in life of westerners. Some years ago these movements were called New Age. In these days very rarely we hear word "new age" any more.

But we can still see how people are looking for peace of mind from different kinds of spiritual exercises that often relate to the religions of the Far East like Hinduism and Buddhism. These movements underline spirituality, but their faith is not doctrinal. That's why these movements live well together with human centred worldview in the post-modern era. In this context man can say that you have your faith, I have mine. Let's live happy together sharing these common principles of humanism. But if somebody dares to say that there is objective truth and objective moral rules outside of man's own judgements, he has to be careful. If somebody dares to question the most holy basic assumption that "man is the centre of universe" "flexible" and "tolerant" people can start to act like angry extreme fundamentalists.

These non-Christian spiritual movements have also entered some Christian Churches. Giving up old doctrinal statements is a very common trend in liberal western Churches. It is very common trend to say that the Holy Bible is just a book written by people to the people living in ancient times. We, as today's people have to create our own understanding about it. Many theologians recommend that we should give up old doctrinal statements and find a Christianity that fits into the post-modern era. They say that Christians who still want to hold onto two thousand year old doctrines are often seen as old fashioned, backward and even dangerous. Preachers of this new "Christianity" say: doctrines are not real but man's experience is. The actual goal of their faith is not the God who exists outside of man and the books that tell about this God. The goal is a subjective spirit inside of man that is in the connection or seeks to be in the connection with divine Spirit of the universe or something else like that.

I call this kind of worldview a spirit centred worldview.

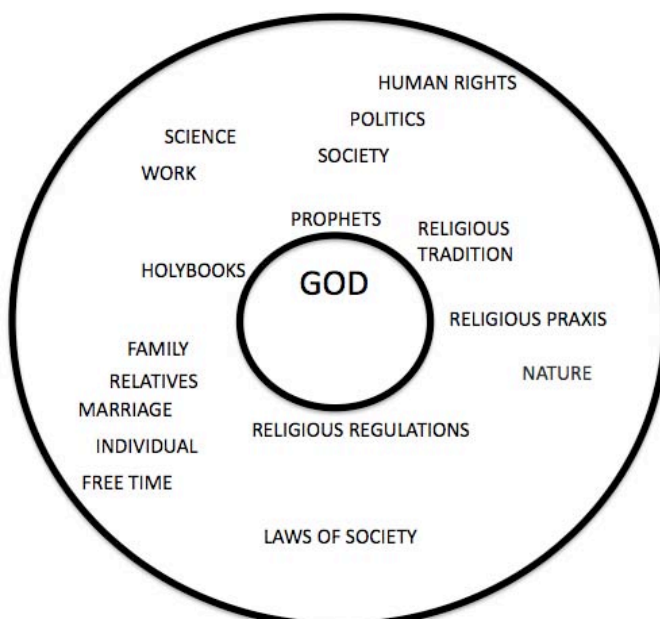


*Spirit centred worldview (Spirituality, individuality etc, but holy books, religious regulations are far away from the centre. Things that relate to “normal” life (like work, family, science etc) are seen as less meaningful, because important things are experienced on a spiritual level.)*

Although this way of being can be seen in the European context, I think it is more common in Far-East religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. You may also see some common things between this chart and Sufism and other tasavvufi movements.

**Post-Christian era’s interpretation about God centred monotheistic worldview**

This room is full of experts on Islam. So, I do not dare say anything about it. You should be the ones teaching me on this topic. But I will try to briefly describe how monotheistic religions are generally seen from a post-Christian point of view.



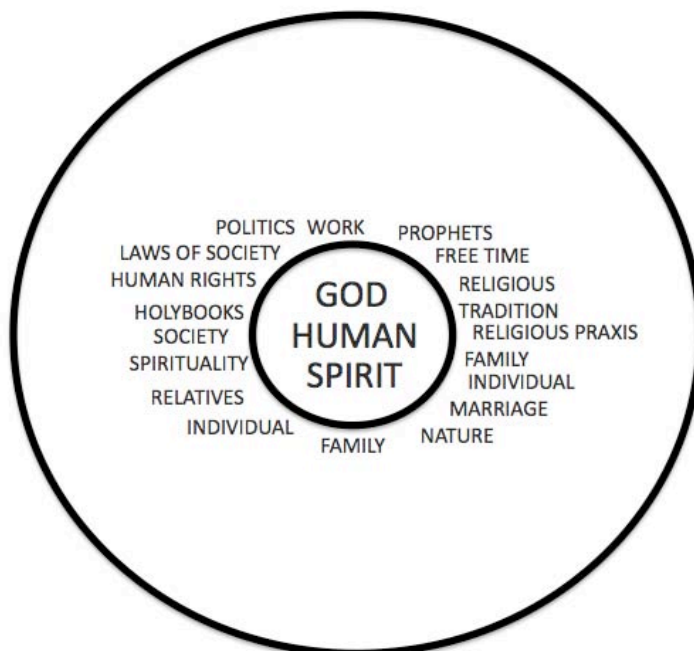
*Post-Christian interpretation about God centred worldview. When God is seen to be in the centre, Holy books and prophets are close to the centre as well. All aspects of life find their places in this system according divine patterns.*

Do some of these pictures resemble Islam in any way? I would be interest in hearing your thoughts at some point.

What about a Christian worldview? Which one of these comes closest to it? None is in my opinion.

Like Islam, Christianity is also often misinterpreted in western post-Christian discussions. It is much easier to make a straw man, than to take a representative of a competing worldview seriously.

As a Lutheran Christian we often don't recognize the picture that liberal adherents of the post-Christian era hold about Christianity. Christianity is understood correctly when it is understood through the Holy Trinity. So the correct picture is not one of these pictures, but all of them together.



*Christian worldview based on Trinitarian understanding*

In the centre of the Christian worldview is 1) God, 2) man, incarnated God, Jesus Christ and 3) Holy Spirit.

According to the Christian faith God is one. So, Christians believe that there is only one God. This one and only God has three persons who are 1) Father God –Creator, 2) Son – Savior, Jesus Christ who incarnated to the world as a child of Holy Mary and 3) Holy Spirit - Sanctifier. This Trinitarian essence of God determines the essence of a Christian's life and Christian worldview. In this picture God, humanity and spirituality are in balance. When Christians view this world, they see it through the picture of the Trinity.

1 - Christians believes that there is one God who is absolute and objective truth. Morality is not relative, but God determines the good and the bad.

2- Because God created man, Christians believe that it is a good thing to be a man. The mission that God has given to man is to live a normal life: love and be loved, get married, build homes, have children, study, work, earn money, be a active member of society, practice science, plant trees etc. This is also the purpose of life. Real Christianity does not encourage us to search for some kind of platonic or Gnostic higher spiritual level of life. This normal life is good and it is enough. That's why the value of man's life is absolute and no one is allowed to take other person's life or intentionally make it miserable.

In Christianity man does not have to try to reach God's spiritual essence, because God has already reached man becoming man in Jesus Christ. Incarnation was necessary because of the sin of mankind. Sin had to be atoned for and that happened when Jesus, whole man and whole God, suffered and died on the cross.

For Christians Jesus is also the incarnate word of God. The Christian's Holy Book is the Bible. A Christian's relationship to the Bible is based on the idea, that actual word of God is incarnated Jesus Christ.

The incarnation of God also gives a model for the Christian life. Like you may see, this makes Christianity different from a God centred picture where God is far away and believers try to find favour with God with their good works and deeds. It also differs from spirit centred picture where God has a spiritual essence and believers try to be a part of God or find deep connection with God in a spiritual sense. Like God centred, also a spirit centred worldview conflicts with normal life. If God was known only at spiritual level, normal life; body, family, normal work become meaningless and even despicable.

3- Thirdly in the Christian worldview we have the Holy Spirit in the centre. Jesus Christ went back to heaven after his resurrection, but he sent The Holy Spirit to be with Christians. The Holy Spirit works in the word of God and creates faith. Faith is not man's choice or decision, but a miracle that God makes with his Holy Spirit. This is a mystical side of Christianity and on the other hand it is very practical thing. Jesus Christ gave a mission to Christians. He said that we are to proclaim the Good news about forgiveness of sin to everybody. Jesus didn't tell us to make a lot of converts or force people to be Christian. Why didn't He do that? Because; it would have been against the nature of Holy Trinity. According to the Christian faith believing is not something that man can make or create. It is a work of Holy Spirit who works in the word of God and sacraments that are available for all in the Christian Church. The Holy Spirit's mission is to create faith and remind believers that there is no salvation other than in Jesus Christ.

This is the how I describe the Christian worldview. Everything is in relation to and in balance with the centre: the Trinitarian God. The pictures of the Christian worldview given in post-Christian discourse or by heretical Christian groups or Christian false teachers miss balance of these three aspects. That's why their teachings are not an acceptable from Christian point of view.

### **Lastly**

In this presentation I have tried to present to you some common ways to understand and explain the current climate of European thought. Especially I concentrated on Human centred, spirit centred and Christian worldviews. Like I said, I do admit that these pictures are just frames that help us classify different kind of beliefs. They are not precise photos of somebody's worldview.

How worldviews act in practice is a different story. I see the worldview of the individual person is in the constant interaction with the dominating discourses in the context of life. Individual worldviews are changing and often very flexible. I do not see worldviews as list of beliefs, but as a way of being. That's why I prefer existential approach in the study of the worldviews. Unfortunately this time I have no chance to go deeper into this topic.

Post-Christian<sup>4</sup> and post-modern thinking challenges Christian faith. Islamic faith faces the same challenge especially in the European context. Like Christian faith and worldview also Islamic faith and worldview are often misinterpreted in the post-modern context. Because at the heart of Christianity is an idea about God who acts and an idea about winning by losing (we Lutherans call this theology of cross), I am not worried about Christianity in the modern world. Muslim scholars who are working to establish imam education and Islamic faculties in the European context are forced to describe their position regarding these described challenges of modern time. As a researcher, I am very interested in knowing what these positions are. Although it is my study topic in Turkish context, I hope that you will tell and teach me more about this from an Iranian perspective. Thank you.

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<sup>4</sup> When I am using a term "post-Christian", I do not mean, that Christianity has disappeared and now we are living time after Christianity. In this paper post-Christian means a new kind of thinking that follows Christian worldview that was very common before post-Christian era. Christian thinking had an important role in European thinking still a couple of hundreds of years ago. Although today its role is less important, Christian faith still provides main principles for worldviews of many people.