Exclusion versus inclusion: Searching for Biblical inspiration?

Chair: the church in the context of Islam

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I. Introduction

The overarching question of the research of the chair *The Church in the Context of Islam* is how the Christian community could relate to a multi-religious society and in particular to Islam. One of the issues in that context is the tension between exclusion and inclusion.

Us vs them

Every society knows mechanisms of in- and exclusion. Every group knows certain standards, and when someone does not abide by these standards he or she will be excluded, whether it is a football player with unfair play, a lawyer without integrity or a criminal that steals. It is, however, also true in a more informal way. The 'us vs them' mentality is not just widespread, but also an ingrained part of the human psyche. It is a mechanism of self-definition and survival, which provides clarity and protects the community.[1]

The Christian community is marked by similar mechanisms of in- and exclusion. On the one hand the church has always been inclusive, in the sense that everyone is welcome just as he or she is, independent of belief, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, abilities etc. The Church is not for saints but for sinners and has always cared for believers and non-believers in times of crises.

On the other hand, it has also always been clear that not everyone who participates in a church is automatically a follower of Christ and a member of the community. And whoever rejects the core message or way of life of a certain Christian community is often excluded. One of the issues that faced the church in the first centuries AD was the question what to do with the so called lapsi, those who under pressure of persecution fell away from the Christian faith and denied Christ. Were they to be welcomed again, when they would repent? Other ethical or doctrinal issues have also been reason for exclusion from the church community. Church discipline has been actively present in church history.

Religious inclusion and exclusion

Behind this more social aspect of inclusion/exclusion, there is a is deeper issue. Christianity is – like any other religion/belief system –exclusive in its view of reality. Believing certain things about the existence of God and the world/universe excludes other perspectives. This is also true when there is a willingness to engage in dialogue with other perspectives. Even a more pluralistic view on truth, the search for understanding by connecting different belief systems or believing there is no absolute truth, is exclusive, as it excludes the conviction that there is only one truth.

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[1] Cf. N. Elias and J.L. Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders: A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage, 1994, 2nd edition).

The tension between inclusion/exclusion is also present in the core texts of Christianity, The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. There are very exclusive texts on who does or does not belong to the people of God and there are very 'inclusive' texts. E.g.: Jesus is quoted as saying that the one who is not against us is for us (Mk. 9:40 ESV), but at the same time that 'whoever is not with me is against me' (Lk. 11:23 ESV).

In the project Inclusion/exclusion, searching for biblical inspiration, the question is what this tension between exclusion and inclusion means for the presence of the Christian community in the context of Islam. Even if Christianity and Islam have many beliefs and practices in common, they differ substantially in their view on core issues. Could a Christian community that beliefs that God has fully revealed himself in Christ connect with those who do not share that belief, and if so: how? Does not the simple fact that the New Testament is missionary in character and is urging followers of Jesus Christ to 'go and make disciples of all nations'(Matt 28:19) exclude peaceful cooperation with Muslims for the sake of their salvation? Could the church still work for the common good of society and build a society where there is place for everyone, including Muslims and all those who do not become disciples of Christ or deny the essence of the Christian faith? Does that mean what Christians belief is not essential? Is it possible somehow to keep the tension between inclusion and exclusion? Does the church have to choose between assimilation on the one hand (downplaying its identity for the sake of community and inclusion) or isolation on the other (emphasizing and guarding its own identity for the sake of community and inclusion). Is the Christian community defined by a strict boundary (bounded set) or by a center (centered set)? Is membership defined by a boundary of faith, believed dogma's, rituals and certain ways of behaviour or by a movement towards or away from the center: Jesus Christ.[2]

It is interesting to ask these questions specifically in the context of Islam, since Islam knows exactly the same tensions between emphasizing the essence of the Islamic faith as the apex of God's revelation and correction/fulfilment of previous revelations to Jews and Christians, and a coherent and inclusive view of society.

> In this context we should be aware that the terminology of in- and exclusion is ambivalent and open for different interpretations. Exclusivism/exclusion and inclusivism/inclusion can be used in a 'theologia religionum', describing different models of looking at the religious other. But it can also be used in the context of daily life, describing processes of participation in or exclusion from communities. E.g.: can we create a society where there is a place for everyone equally, independent of belief, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, abilities, etc. or are there limits to inclusion. These different meanings should not be confused. Religiously, people can be very exclusive and still be very inclusive towards other people. And vice versa: religious pluralism that seems to be very inclusive could still be exclusive in daily life. It is important to be aware of these differences. One of the challenges in this research is to proper define these terms, the other, to position this project in relation to existing current research.

Research

The main purpose of the research is to help the Christian community – in Church and society – to participate in this world, without losing its own identity, by reflecting on the tension between the inclusive and exclusive aspect of the Christian faith. Is it possible that the church is committed to

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[2] Paul G. Hiebert, 'Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories' in: *Gospel in Context* 1 (4), 1978, 24-29.

strive for an inclusive society, while at the same time believing there is only one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit? Can the Christian community contribute to a peaceful society in a context with sometimes radically opposing worldviews, especially in relation to Islam?

The main research question:

- How do exclusive tendencies relate to inclusive aspects of Christianity and what does that mean for the position and calling of the Church in relation to Islam?
  In other words:
  - o Should a Christian faith community be inclusive and to what extent?
  - o Are there limits to inclusiveness?
  - o If so: what are these limitations and how do they affect the relationship between the Church and Islam?

Approach

We have chosen to approach this question by looking at one or more exclusive texts in the Bible. We could have started with inclusive texts. The advantage is that this builds on a positive and connecting approach to others, which could help in times of polarization. The disadvantage is that it will be difficult to give attention to exclusive texts at a later stage. Exclusive texts often reveal fundamental differences between religious communities. They have a strong impact on the boundaries of the theological playground, whether they play a direct role in the attitude of the Christian community or not. They reveal a way of thinking, that determine the limits and options of inclusiveness and could be a major obstacle for peaceful coexistence.

Inclusive texts also do not always help us to understand the theological, sociological and emotional barriers that exist in Christian communities, especially if they are a minority in a secular or Islamic world and feel threatened. These texts do not always help to address these barriers. Exclusive texts do. They can help us understand the kind of inclusivity the church is advocating.

Apart from that, inclusivity is never absolute. A Christian that does not accept the Qur'an as Divine revelation nor the prophet Muhammad as Divine messenger is in most Islamic communities not accepted as true Muslim. Likewise, someone who is not interested in Christ, can hardly be called a member of the Christian community, even though someone is welcome to be present in church services. This is not only true for religious communities, but for society as a whole as well. In an evil, broken world, no one expects that evil is simply embraced. It must be excluded, in order to protect the victims of evil. Boundaries are necessary. Whoever is not willing to respect good over evil will in one way or another be excluded. Those who do not adhere to the rules of life and the laws of a country, risk facing prosecution and can be fined or locked up. The question therefore is not, whether we promote inclusiveness or exclusiveness, but what kind of inclusivity we want to realize/stand for. Exclusive texts describe and prescribe the boundaries of inclusiveness and therefore present to us the core questions, that what is truly at stake.

Apostasy

Furthermore, we have chosen to focus especially on the question of (the response to) apostasy. For different reasons:

1. Apostasy is an ultimate testcase for the tension between inclusion and exclusion. The death penalty that is required by different Biblical passages is the most exclusive form of social and

religious exclusion, in that it fully eliminates the person from the community. This brings us to the crucial questions about God, his people and society.

2. This testcase is clearly present in Church history. In different phases the church has responded differently to people who left the Christian faith/Christian community, varying from exclusion from the Eucharist/Lord's supper to handing them over to the legal authorities for (capital) punishment. An important question in the first centuries was, if the so called lapsi – those who had fallen away from Christ under severe pressure and persecution – should be accepted again into the community after repentance.

3. Apostasy is an important issue in the relationship between Christianity and Islam. Apostasy in traditional Islamic thinking is very problematic. Even though today there are different interpretations among Muslim scholars, the death penalty is still considered by many the true response in an Islamic state, as many (Sunni) law schools require the death penalty. That is particularly important because of the situation of many Muslims who leave their religion or want to follow Jesus. Their situation in the world is extremely difficult[3], although there are several exceptions. It is, however, unfair for Christians to discuss these issues with Muslims without looking at similar ideas in the texts within their own tradition. In the history of Christianity, we come across different stories of exclusion. After the Reconquista of Spain on Islam by the Christian community, Muslims (and Jews) were faced with the choice between conversion (baptism), leaving Spain or the death penalty. When comparing Islamic and Christians responses to apostasy it is important to be aware of differences in religious and social context. Interpretations of the relation between religion and state, religion and ethnicity and individuals and the community are important for the way people understand and apply their tradition.

Textreading

In the Bible there are a number of passages that require the death penalty for (inciting) apostasy. According to Deut. 17:2-7 every Israelite who turns away from the one God in order to worship other Gods must be killed (cf. Deut. 13). Such hard requirements also apply in case of adultery (Deut 22:22-24, Lev. 20:10), the killing of another person (Num 35:30-32), breaking the Sabbath (Ex. 25:2) and disobeying one's parents (Deut. 21:18-21). Besides these explicit commands, there are several other passages that emphasize exclusion rather than inclusion, by example Jesus' saying that who is not with Him is against Him, that He did not come to bring peace, but a sword (Matt. 10:34 ESV), or Paul's appeal not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14). These texts seem to speak about an antithesis between the ones who belong to the community of faith and the ones who don't. In the light of these texts the question is not just how the church can be a partner in working for an inclusive society, but whether this is possible at all. In what way can these texts still inspire the Church in a completely different context today?

There are two aspects of this.
1. How do we interpret exclusive texts from the Scriptures that call the congregation to separate themselves from those who do not follow in the footsteps of Jesus or to exclude those who stop believing in God from the community? This research wants to answer three questions:
   a) What did these texts mean in their time and context?

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[3] Z. Meral, *No Place to Call Home. Experiences of Apostates from Islam and Failures of International Community* (London: Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 2008).

b) How did the Christian community deal with that in the course of history?

c) What do these texts mean for today and how do they relate to mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion?

The reinterpretation of these and other texts has a multidisciplinary character and must help the Christian theology and community to redefine her conceptual framework, ideology or world view in relation to the multi-religious society (systematic-theological). Ideally it will help find a theological framework or approach, maybe even a methodology, creating a safe environment for addressing conflicting truths without compromising one's own identity and faith.

Ideally, this research could be enriched and deepened by engaging in the meeting and conversation with Islamic and Jewish researchers and/or literature, because of similar approaches to the exclusion of unbelievers or apostates. How could the Muslim and/or Jewish perspective challenge or enrich the Christian reading of these texts.

2. What is the meaning and impact of exclusive texts on the life of the church and the professional community? There is a connection here between the research of the Chair and the research of the Christian University of Applied Sciences in Ede: *Conflicting perspectives and religious diversity in professional practices/settings.* The question is to find and test an approach to handling conflicting perspectives in professional practice and organisations, especially in relation to the Islamic community, in the light of the reading of the texts. How does a believing professional deal with conflicting and mutually exclusive perspectives? What is 'good' work/life in this respect?

From this connection with the Christian University of Applied Sciences both institutions will benefit. On the one hand the research of the VU is linked with the concrete reality of today (valorisation), on the other hand, research can only be done from the specific context in which we live. This back and forth movement is helpful for both the Chair at the VU and the Lectorate at the Christian University of Applied Sciences.

II.   Implementation

Track 1: text reading.

There are two ways to proceed here:

a. Working with scholars on interpretation of texts (OT apostasy texts and 2 Cor. 6:14ff). Deliverable: scholarly book, published with e.g. Brill or Routledge, with different scholars from Christian and Islamic (and Jewish) perspective.

b. Look at a number of specific situations (1-5), as case studies, from the different organizations that participate in the chair, where this theme is present. In order to keep the connection with the research of texts, a good way to proceed would be to have different groups in different situations read and study these texts. How are these texts read, interpreted, experienced? Preferably with Muslim participation? That would need a researcher on the ground to get and analyze the results of such a reading.

This requires someone locally who is able to lead focus groups and someone who is able to summarize and analyse the data.

The research outline/design needs to be further developed in several ways:

i.   A clearer plan of working with scholars on which texts and a methodology.

ii. A clear design/plan for the focus groups in different areas.
iii. The right people to lead focus groups and analyse the data.
iv. How to bring in Muslims, reading Christians texts or their own tradition?
v. Provide a framework, research-questions, objectives and desired outcomes for the focus groups.
vi. Do we focus on one region or many regions? Here my preference is to concentrate on one region, the Middle East and North Africa. For two reasons
   a. The research should not lose itself in comparing all the regions of the world. Then the balance will shift from text reading to context reading. That should be avoided.
   b. This region is well known to most organisations, would probably deliver the right researchers on the ground and is well known to the researcher.

Track 2: Connecting with Christian University of applied sciences and professional practices.
To be explored

III. Preliminary SCHEDULE

A. Year one: oct 2019 – august 2020:
   - Finalizing research question and program
   - Finding researcher/projectleader
   - Preparing group of scholars to read texts together
   - Questions and research focus: specific assignment for reading texts
   - Working on a plan with Christian University of Applied Science

   With partner organizations:
   - Finding groups to read and discuss these texts.
   - Finding researchers to work on texts.
   - Specific assignment for reading texts
   - Plan to analyse and interpret the results
   - Exploring networking with OCMCS and Fuller)

Year two: sept. 2020 – aug. 2021
   - Working in groups in different areas with the chosen texts
   - Working as scholarly group with different scholars looking at different aspects of the issues
   - Spring 2020 Academic Expert meeting

Year Three: sept. 2021 – aug. 2022
   - Bringing together first results (conferences, expert meetings, seminars for a wider public)
   - Collecting and interpreting/analysing the results of the readings groups

Year four: sept. 2022- aug. 2023
   Reporting and publication

IV. Results

   1. Academic publication, proceedings academic expertmeeting/confrerence on apostasy in Christianity and Islam
   2. Publication exclusion and inclusion, semi academic
   3. Material for different organisations

Media