Law and Love

A Muslim Response to the Fall McGinley Lecture Delivered by Reverend Patrick Ryan, SJ

November 9 and 10, 2011, Fordham University

Amir Hussain

_"Al-salaamu alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatahu, peace be upon you and the Mercy and Blessings of God. I am honoured and delighted to be invited back to Fordham to offer a brief response to the wonderful Fall McGinley lecture that we heard from Father Ryan. A very simple and a very sincere “thank you” to all of you who are reading these words. I need to single out, as always, Father President Joseph McShane for his hospitality, Provost Stephen Freedman for his support, Sister Anne-Marie Kirmse for her help with the arrangements, Matthew Windell and Joshua Bishop for their help with the power point and the music when these lectures were originally delivered, Professor Setzer for her wise words, and of course Father Ryan for inviting me to respond to his lecture.

“Eid Mubarak” to the members of the Muslim community who celebrated _Eid al-Adha_ on Sunday, November 6, a holiday which commemorates Abraham offering up his son for sacrifice. This is celebrated on the tenth day of the month of pilgrimage. Traditionally, the head of the household slaughters an animal, and the meat is eaten by the family as well as distributed to the poor. These days, when many live in cities and have no access to animals—nor the skill to slaughter an animal—Muslims often rely on commercial butchers to do the slaughtering for them. The week previous, those of you in the Christian tradition celebrated All Souls Day, or as it is known in the Catholic Church, the Commemoration of all_
the Faithful Departed. Where I live, in the town of Our Lady, the Queen of the
Angels, this is celebrated as Día de los Muertos, with the building of ofrendas and
the visitation of graveyards to connect with the deceased. Am I right here in
remembering something from St. Augustine, perhaps in the Confessions, where he
takes his mother Monica to task for banqueting with the deceased in the
cemetery? I will return to both of these rituals, Eid and All Souls Day, where
there are connections to the food issues that Father Ryan mentioned in his talk.

With the theme of the faithful departed in mind, I offer my response
tonight in memory of one of my teachers and my friends, Alan Segal of Barnard
College. Alan died of leukaemia on February 13 of this year. He is best known
for this book, Rebecca’s Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World,
which celebrated its 25th anniversary this year. It was a follow-up to his first book,
Two Powers in Heaven, which turns 35 in 2012 and will be reissued in an
anniversary edition by Baylor University Press. On the very first page of
Rebecca’s Children, Alan wrote: “So great is the contrast between previous
Jewish religious systems and rabbinism that Judaism and Christianity can
essentially claim a twin birth. It is a startling truth that the religions we know
today as Judaism and Christianity were born at the same time and nurtured in the
same environment.”

I know that I am here to talk about Islam and Muslims, but I
cannot resist the opportunity to talk about Alan’s work on the connections
between Judaism and Christianity.

Father Ryan has talked about the vision of Peter, recounted in Acts, where
dietary laws were changed (Acts 10: 9-15):
The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ But Peter said, ‘Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean.’ And a voice spoke to him again the second time, ‘What God has cleansed you must not call common.’ This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again.

In *Rebecca’s Children*, Alan reminds us that: “Peter is so amazed by the command to stop observing the food laws that the vision needs to be repeated to him three times. The three-fold repetition may also have the literary function of persuading some Jewish-Christian readers of Acts of the desirability of giving up the food laws.”

The passage that follows this in Acts is the conversion of Cornelius, a Gentile. Of these two passages, Alan wrote,

The issue of the kosher laws is directly related to the issue of the admission of Gentiles. By placing the two issues together in this way, Luke is saying that the old symbolic distinctions separating Jew from Gentile cannot continue to disunite the Christian community. Luke is applying the Pauline principle of conversion to the Christian community in
a way that Paul had probably not entirely anticipated, since Paul was not fully aware of any difference between Judaism and Christianity, living at a time when Gentile Christianity was a struggling new community. No use of the purity laws can be allowed to create distinctions within Christianity.  

It is the breaking down of the distinctions between the living and the dead that are central to Día de los Muertos. While these feasts may be disapproved of by some, there are important connections here between the living and the departed. There are connections here of course with Islam, as the Qur’anic verse 15:23 reminds us: “Indeed it is We (that is, God), We who give life and We who give death and unto Us is the returning.” The Hajj rites serve to reinforce the connections between believers. There are connections to the deceased, of course, as those who have made the Hajj keep their pilgrimage clothes, pieces of simple, unsown cloth, for their next use, the burial shroud. But there are connections with the living community as well, with the meat from the sacrifice being distributed both to the immediate family and to the needy in one’s community.

Turning to Islam, let me draw your attention to one of your very own here at Fordham, Professor Kathryn Kueny, who directs the Religious Studies program. A decade ago, Kathy published a beautiful little book, The Rhetoric of Sobriety, where she discussed the verses Father Ryan mentioned about the ambiguous role of wine in the Qur’an.  

It will surprise most non-Muslims (and, unfortunately, some Muslims) that Islam is a religion with a strong emphasis on love. Here, I draw your attention to
the work of William C. Chittick, who teaches down the road in Long Island at the
State University of New York, Stony Brook. One of my first serious scholarly
presentations was in 1995, at a conference that featured Bill Chittick and his
spouse, Sachiko Murata. My talk was entitled: “Hubb, Wadda and Rahmah in
North American Islam” and used three of the words for love used in the Qur’an.

(the 13th century Sufi poet), and the resulting effect that this relationship had on
Rumi. According to Shams, the Qur’an is like an ‘Ishq-nāma, a “book of love.”

How many of us, Muslim or not, think of “love” as the first word that comes to
mind when the Qur’an is mentioned?

Bill reminds us that:

In talking about love, the Qur’an uses derivatives of two words, wudd and
hubb, which are typically understood in God’s case as synonyms. In the
usual lists of divine names, a derivative of wudd is given, that is, al-
wadūd, and usually it is interpreted to mean ‘loving.’ The specific pattern
of the word, however, can be used for both active and passive participles,
so some scholars explain that wadūd means both ‘lover’ and ‘beloved.’ If
we then insert the name into the formula of tawhīd, it means that there is
no lover but God and no beloved but God. In other words, God alone truly
loves, and God alone is the true object of love.

It is also worth remembering that the Qur’anic verse, which is quoted
more than any other in the literature on love is 5:54: “God loves them, and they
love God.” There are four statements in this short verse: God is lover, human beings are the objects of God’s love, human beings are lovers, and God is the object of their love. It is also important here to remember that God’s love is directed specifically at human beings, or to put it another way, the only objects of God’s love mentioned in the Qur’an are humans. In the Qur’an, God’s love for creation is often called *rahma*, mercy or compassion. Etymologically, *rahma* comes from *rahim*, or “womb.” The word’s basic sense is a mother’s sheltering love for her children. A number of sayings of the Prophet make the connection between God’s mercy and a mother’s love. For example, “Surely God is more merciful toward God’s servant than any mother toward her child.”

It was Bill who introduced me to the work of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī, author of *Kashf al-asrār*, “The Unveiling of the Mysteries,” one of the longest pre-modern commentaries on the Qur’an in the Persian language (completed in 1126 CE). In a passage explaining the meaning of the Qur’anic verse (2:89), “When there came to them a book from God” (2:89), Maybudī said this about the Qur’an:

> A book came to them—and what a book! For it was the Lord’s reminder to His lovers. It was a book whose title was “The Eternal Love,” a book whose purport is the story of love and lovers. It was a book that provides security from being cut off, the remedy for unsettled breasts, health for ailing hearts, and ease for grieving spirits—a mercy from God to the folk of the world.  

If we know of love in Islam, chances are that our knowledge comes from the
Sufis, whom Father Ryan mentioned. The name *Sufism* comes from the Arabic word *tasawwuf*, or “the process of becoming a Sufi.” Sufism is experiential in nature, involving a commitment to personal transformation. The root meaning of *Sufi* is “wool,” which is consistent with the ascetic character of the beginnings of Sufism. Early followers would wear woollen garments in conscious opposition to the wearing of more expensive fabrics such as silk and satin. They were reacting to the worldliness that came with the expansion of Islamic civilization in the eighth century. In time, however, the asceticism gave way to a tradition that included the appreciation of the arts, including exquisite, sensual poetry. I saw some wonderful examples yesterday, when I went to the new Islamic exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (entitled “Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia”). Sufism cuts across divisions within Islam, just as Christian mysticism often cuts through denominational barriers. Sufis are male and female, and they include Sunni and Shi’a Muslims. They are organized in many communities or orders throughout the world. Just as there are a great many ways to be Muslim, so there are a great many ways to be a Sufi Muslim. Some Sufis show what may appear to be an anti-intellectualism in their pursuit of direct experiences of the divine. Some speak of their mystical understandings in the language of complex philosophy. Others emphasize ritual practices such as turning in circles or singing devotional songs.

In recent years, one of the most famous singers of these devotional songs was my Punjabi homeboy, the late Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, who left us too soon in 1997. A year before his death, he recorded a song with American Rock musician
Eddie Vedder (from Pearl Jam fame) for the soundtrack to the film *Dead Man Walking*. That of course was based on the life of Sister Helen Prejean, and her work to bring an end to the abomination that is the death penalty in this county. It is with their song, “The Face of Love,” that I end. And if you don’t understand the Urdu/Punjabi that Nusrat is singing (or for that matter, the mumbled English that Eddie often uses), that doesn’t matter. This is the ecstatic form of singing known as *qawalli*, where the words and syllables aren’t important, but where the sounds speak directly to the heart. In this way, there is a direct connection with the bodily experience that Professor Setzer described in her response.

The Face of Love
(Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan with Eddie Vedder)

*Jeena kaisa pyar bina* [what is life without love?]

*Is duniya mein aaye ho to* [now that you have come into this world]

*Ek duje se pyar karo* [love each other, one another]

*Jeena kaisa pyar bina* [what is life without love?]

*Is duniya mein aaye ho to* [now that you have come into this world]

*Ek duje se pyar karo* [love each other, one another]

Look in the eyes

Of the face of love

Look in her eyes
Oh, there is peace
No, nothing dies
Within pure light
Only one hour
Of this pure love
To last a life
Of thirty years
Only one hour
So come and go

NOTES

1 My remembrance of Alan is available from the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* at


3 Ibid., 164.

4 Ibid., 165.


\(^8\)Ibid., 16.