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**Christian–Muslim Dialogue: Perspectives of Four Lebanese Thinkers**, by Heidi Hirvonen, Leiden, Brill, 2012, 349 pp., €131.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-90-04-23849-7

In her work *Christian–Muslim Dialogue: Perspectives of Four Lebanese Thinkers*, Heidi Hirvonen presents the contributions of four Lebanese thinkers – two Muslim (Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah and Mahmoud Ayoub) and two Christian (Georges Khodr and Mouchir Aoun) – to the ongoing Christian–Muslim dialogue in the Middle East. In the introductory chapter the author gives a general account of the major developments in Christian–Muslim dialogue throughout history as well as a concise presentation of the historical, religious and socio-political context of Lebanon. In the second and third chapters, Hirvonen turns to the theological foundations for inter-religious dialogue in the thinking of each of the four authors and makes an evaluation of the strengths and the weaknesses of each contribution.

The author demonstrates that Fadlallah holds a conservative Shi'ite position concerning the final authority of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad and a "rationalist, practical-ethical theology" (216). Fadlallah regards Islam as the only way to the hereafter, although he attempts to present some, rather superficial common ground between Islam and Christianity (124). Hirvonen maintains that this is also implied in Fadlallah's preference for making Lebanon an Islamic state, seeing dialogue as a means of *da'wa* (invitation to Islam). In contrast, Ayoub opts for acceptance of religious plurality and aspires to a theological-spiritual encounter with Christians.

Ayoub, alongside his pluralist tendencies, finds common ground between the mystical traditions of Sufi Islam and Christianity. Regarding Christian theology, he prefers the Eastern Christian perception of redemption and deification (223). Ayoub interprets the divine sonship of Jesus and the crucifixion narrative metaphorically and explains the Trinity in terms of divine

economy (202), which he compares to God's commandments and guidance in Islam. Furthermore, Hirvonen considers that Ayoub holds to the pre-Islamic revelations and admits the manifold ways to salvation, considering faith in God as prior to possessing revealed Scriptures.

Georges Khodr is distinguished by his anthropological theology, Trinitarian approach, eschatological-universal interpretation, mystical-apophatic leanings, and his longing for "spiritual perfection" and a sincere encounter with the Other. In addition, Khodr has a broad understanding of revelation, which may, for him, include extra-Christian elements (150), although he discusses the difference between Christian and Islamic conceptions of revelation. Further elements in Khodr's thinking that contribute to Christian-Muslim dialogue are his understanding of sin as the decay of human nature and his interpretation of Christian doctrines such as Trinity and the divine sonship of Jesus by using illustrations and vocabulary that are accessible to Muslims.

Hirvonen maintains that Mouchir Aoun holds an inclusivist theology of religions and that, although he bases his position on the formal claims of the Catholic Church, and particularly on the Vatican II documents, he nevertheless hopes for universal restoration and accepts religious diversity as "divinely willed", thus coming close to a position of "theocentric pluralism" (95). The author also proposes that Aoun's comparison between the diversity of understandings of revelation, prophecy and scripture in Christianity and Islam enhances the potential for mutual knowledge and understanding. Aoun also stresses the need to share with Muslims the existential implications of Christian doctrines, such as the common experience of divine mercy, rather than their theological significance (244).

In the fourth chapter, Hirvonen shows that the four authors have some ethical visions in common. Nevertheless, while Fadlallah justifies violence and seeks a "liberative Islamist

discourse” aiming at the actualization of a Lebanese Islamic republic (268; 274), Khodr and Aoun present the “principle of non-violence” and the unconditional love of Jesus as having the highest authority (266), aspiring to a democratic system where equality, freedom and fellowship prevail.

However, Hirvonen’s claim that Khodr “is against the Western idea of secularization” (295) misses some elements. In his *Afkār wa-ārā’ fī al-ḥiwār al-masīḥī wa-al-islāmī wa-al-‘aysh al-mushtarak* (1999, 187), having in mind the Muslim audience, Khodr explains his worries regarding the abolition of political confessionalism in Lebanon if the legal rights of the various religious groups are not fairly preserved, which might lead to the emergence of an Islamic state. He says: “To speak about a demolition of confessionalism without a detailed electoral system that insures the meeting of all in the Parliamentary Assembly might expose us to the extermination of whole communities” (190). Concerning democracy and secularization, Khodr says: “We accept this philosophy [of the French Revolution] in its depth”, though without considering the Western designations and ways as binding (189). Democracy, for Khodr, would not be possible without equality and justice.

Hirvonen’s book is a scholarly work and makes a substantial academic contribution to research in the field of Christian–Muslim dialogue in the Middle East. It is informative about both religious heritages and has necessarily entailed extensive research and delving into Arabic sources. This makes it a work to be recommended for all theology students interested in Christian–Muslim dialogue in Lebanon. Hirvonen also succeeds in presenting her research in an interesting style, making fair judgments that present both negative and positive aspects of the work of the four writers under consideration. Nevertheless, I have two general critical remarks.

First, the author frequently presents the Muslim and Christian positions on a certain topic without reference to contemporary Christian theological thought and criticisms of traditional Western theology. Citing some modern criticism of what is called “classical theism” would have led to some self-evaluation and self-criticism, which would have contributed significantly to the scope of the work. For example, in describing the similarity between the Eastern Orthodox and Islamic understandings of sin as the perversion of human nature, the author contents herself with presenting the traditional Western Christian view that “sin is inherited from generation to generation through sexual reproduction” (234). This uncritical reading of Western theology may give the reader the impression that Islamic theology is more “modern”, in relation to certain issues, than the Western position.

Second, the work as it stands lacks a thesis or central claim that Hirvonen demonstrates, proves and defends. This would have constituted an original contribution, beyond the mere presentation of the thoughts of the four thinkers. This absence is most strongly felt in the author’s discussion of the thought of Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah. If Fadlallah stands for “unreflective traditionalism” (84, 102), why was he chosen for inclusion in this work? Such a thesis would also have served as the author’s main conclusion at the end of the work, in place of a reiteration of the various arguments presented earlier.

Nonetheless, Hirvonen’s book might serve as a reference work for the study of the thinking and theologies of the four chosen authors.

## Reference

Khodr, Georges. 1999. *Afkār wa-ārā' fī al-ḥiwār al-masīḥī wa-al-islāmī wa-al-‘aysh al-mushtarak* [Thoughts and Views on Christian–Muslim Dialogue and the Common Life]. Vol. 2. Jounieh: Al-Maṭba‘a al-Būlusiyya.

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