Islam: Towards a Christian Assessment

by Hugh Goddard

The Latimer Trust

CONTENTS

Dedicated to

Kenneth Cragg

[to whom the rest of us simply write footnotes]

Hugh Goddard lectures in the Department of Theology at the
University of Nottingham

Introduction

is always very difficult for believers to make a fair assessment of religious convictions which are different from their own. The nature of religious belief is such that it involves a total commitment of heart and mind, and this makes it particularly difficult to acquire and practise the kind of balanced detachment which one would normally expect in any scholarly investigation. Christians and Muslims have both been guilty of caricaturing each other's beliefs, and this has produced a tradition of misunderstanding and mistrust which bedevils inter-faith communication today. Christians in particular need to try and examine themselves, before presuming to criticise the beliefs of others.

In this connection it is worth recalling that there are two texts from the New Testament which are not often quoted in connection with other religious communities. The first is Matthew 22: 39 (and the parallel in Mark 12: 31, where Jesus is recorded as saying, in reply to a question about which is the greatest commandment, that the second is 'To love your neighbour as yourself.' And the second is Matthew 7: 1 (and parallel in Luke 6: 37), where Jesus is recorded as saying 'Judge not, that you be not judged.' In the context of the long history of the relationship between Christians and Muslims, the evidence, from Christian attitudes towards Muslims, would seem to suggest two things: firstly that Christians see caricature and abuse as one aspect of their love for themselves (on the basis of their historical tendency to caricature and abuse Muslims); and secondly that Christian expectations of judgement are that they themselves will – again on the basis of their own judgements of Muslims – be found severely wanting! Given these New Testament imperatives, though, the need is urgent for some kind of assessment of other faiths, and of Islam in particular, which does pay rather more attention to this kind of advice.

Put another way, there is a long tradition in Christian

evaluation of other faiths of comparing the ideals of the Christian faith with the realities of other faiths. This is particularly the case with reference to Islam, which (apart from Judaism) is the faith that has the longest relationship with Christianity over the course of history. Yet simple fairness, let alone Christian charity, demand that like must be compared with like and Christians must use the same standards in judging, or assessing, others as they use in judging and assessing ourselves. There must be no double standards. So, for example, if the phenomena of terrorism, kidnapping and hi-jacking in the Middle East during the last twenty or so years are to be attributed to Islam, the bloody conflicts in Ireland, or South Africa, or Yugoslavia must also be attributed to Christianity, and if it is to be asserted that these latter are 'nothing to do with true Christianity,' as is often said by Christians, it must also be allowed that the former are 'nothing to do with true Islam.' Any faith can look good if its ideals are contrasted with the realities of others, but hard questions may be asked about the extent to which such comparisons are valid.

1.   Islam

tawhid, the unity of God, and the first half of the Islamic declaration of faith, the *shahada*, is 'I declare that there is no god but God.' In this, clearly, Islam is at one with most of the Old Testament, and indeed the form of words used there is almost identical to that used in, for example, Isaiah 44: 6, 8; 45: 22; 46: 9. Given the context within which the message of Islam was preached by Muhammad, in 7th century Arabia, this constantly reiterated insistence that only one God is to be worshipped is not surprising, since the Arabia of that time was essentially a polytheistic society, believing in many gods and goddesses, both animate and inanimate, and so the religious beliefs and practices against which Muhammad preached were in many ways not dissimilar to those condemned by many of the prophets of the Old Testament.

When it comes to describing the nature and character of that one God, for whom the word Allah is used by both Arabic-speaking Muslims and Arabic-speaking Christians, the Muslim Scripture uses a whole range of adjectives and epithets. The two most common are *rahman* and *rahim*, which occur at the start of each chapter of the Qur'an and are usually translated as 'Merciful and Compassionate.' Others stress the greatness and majesty of God, His role as creator and judge of all humankind, and perhaps the best Biblical parallel to the overall picture of God in the Qur'an is the last chapter of the book of Job, where Job confesses to his smallness and insignificance in the face of the greatness and mystery of God. The word 'love,' often used as the single word which summarises the Christian view of God, based, of course, on 1 John 4: 8, is never used of God in the Qur'an, but He is twice described in the Qur'an as 'the loving' (*al-wadud*) (chapter 11 verse 90 and chapter 85 verse 14), and a number of

references speak of Him as gracious, forgiving, generous, patient and kind. In addition the title 'Father,' as commended by Jesus in 'The Lord's Prayer, is never used in the Qur'an, partly, it seems, because of the Qur'an's fear that the use of language of fatherhood and sonship for the divine-human relationship runs the risk of compromising monotheism and degenerating into polytheism.

Two of the greatest Qur'anic statements about God are as follows:

> God – there is no god but He, the living, the eternal. Neither slumber nor sleep seizes Him. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on the earth. Who can intercede with Him save by His leave? He knows what lies before and what lies behind, and nothing is understood of His knowledge except what He wills. His throne extends over the heavens and the earth, and He does not weary of preserving them. He is the Most High, the Most Great. (Chapter 2: verse 255)

and:

> He is God – there is no god but He. He knows the invisible and the visible. He is merciful and compassionate. He is God – there is no god but He. He is the king, the holy one, the source of peace and faith, the guardian, the almighty, the compeller, the supreme. Glory be to God, above all polytheism. He is God – the creator, the maker, the fashioner. To Him belong the names most beautiful. Everything in the heavens and on the earth praises Him, the almighty, the wise. (Chapter 59: verses 22-24)[1]

Later Islamic thought has erected upon the foundation of the Qur'an's teaching a number of different emphases about God. On the one hand Islamic theologians and philosophers have emphasised the

---

[1] There are clear similarities between some of this language and the language of the Psalms, and of Deutero-Isaiah, Other Qur'anic statements about God can be conveniently found in K Cragg, *Readings in the Qur'an*, Collins, 1988, pp 86-92.

greatness and utter otherness of God, stressing the difference between Him and His creation. On the other hand Muslim mystics and devotional writers have focused upon his nearness and his care and compassion for humankind: the Qur'anic foundation for this view is verses such as chapter 50, verse 16, which says 'We (God) created man, and We know what his soul whispers within him. We are closer to him than his jugular vein.' It is in this tradition that the idea of the ninety-nine names of God, which may be repeated as an aid to devotion, has grown up, and here too that the idea of God's nearness has been most repeatedly insisted upon, even, some would say, to the extent of permitting union with or absorption into God.[2]

It is not widely appreciated that there is nothing in the Qur'an which is remotely derogatory about Jesus. Islam is thus unique among the world's religious traditions in that in its scripture, no less, it commends Jesus to its adherents. In some parts of the world, therefore, the name of Jesus is known, not through Christians or the Bible, but rather through the Qur'an.[3] In particular Jesus is referred to in the Qur'an as a 'word from God' and 'a spirit from God' (chapter 4, verse 171), and his miraculous conception and birth is also affirmed (chapter 19, verses 16-34). On the other hand the Qur'an is not so positive about what it understands to be some of the things which Christians say about Jesus, and there are verses in the Qur'an which harshly condemn language about sonship with reference to Jesus' relationship with God.[4]

---

[2] There is an obvious parallel to this spectrum of opinion within the Christian community, as a high Calvinist view of the sovereignty of God may seem rather far removed from the cosy intimacy of more Charismatic views of God.

[3] See E Hulmes, 'Walter Miller and the Isawa: an experiment in Christian-Muslim relationship' in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 41 (1988), pp 233-246.

[4] See, for example, chapter 19, verse 35: 'It is not befitting for God to take to Himself a son. Glory be to Him! When He decrees a thing, He simply says "Be" and it is.' The force of the 'Glory be to Him!' is essentially 'Perish the thought.'

In addition some Qur'anic verses (e.g. 4: 171) seem to suggest that Christians have a belief in three gods, and this too is harshly condemned. Christians, of course, may protest that they do no such thing, but the language of Trinity is often understood by Muslims to be a statement of precisely that. Fundamentally Jesus is understood in the Qur'an to be a messenger, or prophet of God, no different therefore from earlier prophets/messengers of God, of whom some 25 are referred to in the Qur'an, from Adam, Noah, Abraham and Moses to Zechariah and John the Baptist. God, it is clearly asserted, has thus spoken to humankind on a number of occasions, but there is (to say the least) some considerable unease about any idea of His having become human in some way and thus revealed Himself.[5]

As with Islamic thinking about God, so too with Islamic views of Jesus there has developed within the later Muslim community some diversity of opinion. On the one hand some Muslim thinking has focused upon the Qur'anic condemnation of some of the things which Christians have said about Jesus; in other Muslim circles, however, the more positive statements in the Qur'an about Jesus have been emphasised, and so in popular Muslim devotional literature in particular there is a deep appreciation of Jesus as the wise human teacher, and the healer of the sick, even as the raiser of the dead.

The Holy Spirit is less prominent in Muslim discussion, and this is perhaps part of the reason for some of the confusion which exists over exactly what Christians mean by the Trinity, and over what the Qur'an is therefore referring to when it rejects the idea of 'three.' Jesus, as we have seen, is referred to as a 'spirit from God' in the Qur'an, but this is clearly rather different from what Christians mean by the Holy Spirit, and even if later Islamic thought has developed references to a 'Holy Spirit,' there are a number of different opinions as to his exact identity (possibly the angel Gabriel, who brings revelation, or possibly Muhammad himself).

---

[5] All the Qur'anic material which refers to Jesus may be found conveniently grouped together in K Cragg, *Readings in the Qur'an*, Collins, 1988, pp 163-170.

Along with monotheism, which has already been discussed, the second central affirmation of Islam is that Muhammad is the messenger or prophet of God. The second half of the *shahada*, or declaration of faith, is thus 'I declare that Muhammad is the messenger of God.' This does not mean that Muhammad is regarded as the only messenger of God; as we have seen above there are a great many other messengers who are accepted as such by Muslims, and Jesus is included in their number. It does mean, however, that Muhammad has a special place in the line of prophets, particularly because he is held to be the last in that line, the 'seal' or culmination of the whole process.

This also means that it is not the person of Muhammad which is held to be important in mainstream Islam, for it is his message that occupies the centre stage. That message, or the series of revelations which Muhammad received between his call in A. D. 610 and his death in 632, is recorded in the Muslim Scripture, the Qur'an, which was collected and edited in essentially the form in which it exists today within some 25 years of Muhammad's death.[6] It is thus the Muslim scripture which is held to be revelation, and Muhammad is simply regarded as being the medium through which the revelation was made known to humankind.

It is important to add to that statement, however, the

---

[6] The way in which the contents of the Qur'an were arranged then, and thus the form which English language versions still take today, is that after the opening chapter, the *fatiha*, which with respect to its liturgical function, and in some ways also in its contents, is somewhat similar to the position of 'The Lord's Prayer' within the Christian community, the remaining 113 chapters are arranged simply in order of length. This means that they are not in chronological order as they were received by Muhammad. If anything, as a rough guide, the shorter chapters at the end of the Qur'an come from the earlier part of Muhammad's career, while the longer chapters nearer the start of the book, with their greater complexity, come from the later years of Muhammad's career. This is only a rough guide, however, and so the chapters of the Qur'an cannot simply be read in reverse order in the hope that they are then in chronological order.

observation that, even if that is the ideal of Islam, in practice, particularly in those parts of the Muslim world where Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, is not widely known, the person of Muhammad has become a focus of devotion and veneration, and despite the clear insistence of the Qur'an that Muhammad was a mere mortal, some parts of the Muslim community have attributed to him an almost superhuman status, so that he is regarded as 'the perfect man.'[7]

In addition to the Qur'an the early Muslim community recorded and then collected the sayings and actions of Muhammad, which serve as a second source of guidance and instruction for Muslims. This material is known as the Hadith, usually translated 'tradition,' and in terms of the detail of Islamic faith and practice it is in many respects more significant than the Qur'an. Clearly, however, the Qur'an is considered primary, both with respect to chronology and with respect to overall status.[8]

The word 'Islam' itself is simply an Arabic word which means 'submission,' submission that is to God. The word 'Muslim' is then the active participle of 'Islam,' meaning simply 'someone who does submission,' or someone who submits to God. This submission, according to Islam, involves the whole of life. Worship is a particular focus, or demonstration, of that submission, involving as it does formal prayer (*salat*) five times a day, the giving of a proportion of one's income to charity (*zakat*), fasting (*sawm*) between dawn and sunset during one month of the year (*Ramadan*), and if at all possible,

---

[7] A list of the titles given to Muhammad in some later Islamic thought can be found in V Danner, *The Islamic tradition – an introduction*, New York, Amity House, 1988, pp 248-249.

[8] In many respects the best Christian analogy to the Hadith is the New Testament, which is the record of and testimony to the primary Christian revelation, which is the person of Jesus. The Islamic equivalent of that is then not Muhammad but rather the Qur'an.

once in a lifetime, a pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca. Each of these things is not simply of value in itself, but is intended to symbolise the submission of the whole of life to Allah. Perhaps prayer is the most powerful demonstration of that intention, consisting as it does of a series of prostrations, in the best Biblical tradition, before God.[9]

Worship is not the only demonstration of this submission of the whole of life to God, however. All other spheres of life are also involved, from personal ethics to family life, from the economic life of the market-place to the affairs of government and international relations. This is the sphere of the *Shari'a* (Islamic Law), which is, in theory, a comprehensive code for the regulation of the whole of life, both individual and communal, and which is based upon the Qur'an, on Hadith, and also on later Muslim reflection and scholarly discussion.[10]

This yearning for the whole of life to be 'under God' explains how it is that in today's world some Muslims seem to those who are not members of the Muslim community to be preoccupied with matters of politics and the state. Behind the concern of Muslims with these spheres lies quite simply the concern that secularisation, as it has gained in influence in the West (leading to the confining of faith to the private sphere, in many instances), should not infect the Muslim world, which is clear in its view that both public and private life must be under God. To this we will have to return.

In worldwide terms the community (*umma*) of Muslims is currently the second largest religious community, consisting of some 800 million members worldwide.[11] The heartland of the Muslim world is

---

[9] Compare Revelation 1:17.

[10] Christian theology is perhaps the best analogy here, based as it is upon Biblical and Patristic foundations, but with discussion on-going.

[11] Statistics of this kind are notoriously unreliable, but the comparable figure for Christians might be 1,200 million worldwide.

the Middle East, the various Arab nations and Iran, where Islam has been influential for some 1350 years. Slightly later in its history, beginning in the 11th century of the Christian calendar, Islamic influence also extended into what is now Turkey, and into the Indian Subcontinent. And then even more recently Islam has spread into Africa south of the Sahara desert and into South-East Asia. It is not widely appreciated that six of the republics of the former Soviet Union, those in Central Asia, are strongly influenced by Islam, and there is a significant number of Muslims in China too.

The largest concentration of Muslims is in the Indian Subcontinent, in the three nations of Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, in which there are roughly twice as many Muslims (perhaps 250 million) as in the whole of the Arab world (around 120 million). The nation with the largest Muslim population is Indonesia, whose Muslim population is more or less the same in number as all the Arab nations combined.

It is also significant to note that perhaps one third of the world's Muslims live in countries which are not prevailingly Muslim. They live, in other words, in minority situations. Included in this group are, of course, Muslims in Europe and in North America, in each of which Muslims are now the second largest religious community, and this is also the case in Britain, where the Muslim population is probably around one million in number.

Even if the Christian community worldwide currently outnumbers the Muslim one, it is by no means impossible that within twenty or thirty years the Muslim community will have overhauled the Christian one in size. This will not necessarily be due to any large-scale conversion to Islam but will simply be a result of natural demographic change resulting from high birth-rates. A number of Islamic societies are among the nations of the world with the highest birth-rates, a sharp contrast from Western Christian societies, and this is bound to have a dramatic effect on the religious make-up of the world's population in the twenty-first century.

As with all the world's religious communities, there is some diversity within the Muslim community. The main formal division is

that between Sunni and Shi'i Muslims, whose disagreement goes back to the period not long after the death of Muhammad, and was essentially concerned with a dispute over who should lead the Muslim community. Shi'i Muslims thought that Muhammad's immediate family had the prime claim to leadership, but this view was not shared by all Muslims. Today, worldwide, some 10% of Muslims are Shi'is, and the one nation which has Shi'i Islam as its official religion is Iran.

In addition to this formal split, there are also differing schools of thought and emphases within Islam, and perhaps the best known of these in the West is the Sufi movement, which is in a sense the mystical wing of Islam, emphasising the mystery of knowing God, rather than the primacy of obeying God and the *Shari'a*. Sufism is not a separate grouping within the Islamic community so much as a school of thought, but it is of interest not least because of the great respect which many Sufis have for Jesus, who is seen as the ideal spiritual model.

In addition, in more recent Muslim history, a number of reforming movements have arisen in different parts of the Muslim world, and these have their own distinctive emphases and ideas, but in general terms it must be said that the Muslim community has fared far better than the Christian community in attempting to realise its ideal of unity.

2.   Towards a Christian Assessment

Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, had it not been for the defeat of the Muslim army by the Frankish leader Charles Martel at Tours in 732, it might have been the Qur'an rather than the Bible which was studied in Oxford when the University was established there in the 13th century!

Given its assessment of Islam as a threat it was not surprising that medieval Europe interpreted Islam in apocalyptic terms. Christians under Islamic rule in Spain in the 9th century turned to the various apocalyptic passages of the Old and New Testaments in order to find an explanation of its coming, and based on that foundation they evolved the view that Islam was the anti-Christ.[12] The Muslims were not the only people to be granted this title, however, for when the Vikings launched their raids on western Europe at about the same time, they were such a powerful threat to the Christians of their day that they too were given the epithet anti-Christ.

Not all Christians developed such a negative assessment of Islam as a result of their earliest encounter with it, however. The Christians of the East, who were the first to encounter the Muslims,

---

[12] See further K B Wolf, *Christian martyrs in Muslim Spain*, CUP, 1988; and for the later influence of this view in medieval Europe see R W Southern, *Western views of Islam in the Middle Ages,* Harvard UP, 1962.

formulated far less negative views of them. The Greek Orthodox theologian John of Damascus (d 750) concluded on the basis of some knowledge of the Qur'an and some discussion with Muslims that Islam was a Christian heresy. And theologians of other Eastern churches, particularly those who belonged to the Nestorian and Monophysite churches (i.e. those which had not accepted the definitions of Christ given at the Council of Chalcedon) had an even more positive interpretation of the coming of Islam: in their view it was a judgement from God, not on themselves of course, but rather on those Christians who had accepted the Chalcedonian definition, and in particular on the Byzantine Empire, a number of whose provinces were overrun by Muslim armies shortly after the death of Muhammad.

Medieval Europe too, despite its initial very negative assessment of Islam, went on to develop a more sophisticated understanding of it, and in the later Middle Ages there was the beginning of a more serious attempt to reflect upon it. Thus in the 12th century the first translation of the Qur'an was made into Latin, making possible reflection on Islam on the basis of its own sources rather than on the basis of, to modern scholars at least, rather suspect Biblical exegesis. And Europe even began to be influenced by Islamic ideas and practices too: the growth of the universities, for example, was based to some extent on Islamic models, and Islamic philosophical and religious ideas contributed to a number of significant debates within Western Europe.[13]

That did not mean that the older more negative attitudes did not persist on many levels: as one example, the West launched the Crusades against the Muslim 'infidel,' with the intention of recapturing the city of Jerusalem. And Martin Luther wrote in scathing terms about Muslims, as also about Jews and, of course, the

---

[13] See W M Watt, *The influence of Islam on medieval Europe*, Edinburgh UP, 1972; and G Makdisi, *The rise of the colleges – institutions of learning in Islam and the West*, Edinburgh UP, 1981, and *The rise of humanism in classical Islam and the Christian West*, Edinburgh UP, 1990.

Papacy. The use of Muhammad as a figure to frighten naughty children lasted in some parts of Europe right up until he was supplanted by Napoleon.

So there is a long history of negative assessment of Islam among Western Christian writers. As the balance of power between the West and the world of Islam began to change, from round about the year 1650, and as Islam began to be threatened by Western expansion, rather than the other way round, the old negative assessments were not necessarily revised. When Protestant missions got under way at the end of the 18th century, many missionaries still perceived Islam as a threat, as an anti-Christian force, and the legacy of this view has lasted right up until today.

In part this negative view is based upon particular aspects of Islam, such as the Islamic community's abhorrence of any of its members leaving it for another faith, which was a major disincentive from conversion to Christianity. Yet just as medieval Western Europe had perceived Islam as a threat, so too in modern times the West was perceived by many Muslims as a threat, and the context of these negative views must always be kept in mind.

Recent years, particularly the period since 1945, have witnessed a considerable re-examination of traditional thinking about Islam. In part this was an accompaniment to the changed political relationship between countries in which Islam is the dominant faith and those greatly influenced during their history by the Christian faith. The political independence, in other words, of Muslim countries, has made more nuanced reflection possible. The writings of Kenneth Cragg are particularly significant in this connection, as are the works of a number of Roman Catholic scholars who have sought to put into practice the approach to Islam (and other faiths) advocated by the Second Vatican Council.[14]

---

[14] See especially K Cragg, *The call of the minaret*, 2nd ed., Collins, 1986. The statement of the Second Vatican Council concerning Islam may conveniently be found in J Hick and B Hebblethwaite (eds.), *Christianity and other religions -*

Extra urgency has been given to the process of reflection about Islam by the considerable migrations of peoples from different parts of the world to the West in the years since 1945. These migrations were caused largely by economic factors, namely the need of Western countries for labour, and the huge discrepancies in wealth between the first and third worlds. In the case of Britain, the need for labour was met by the immigration of labour from the countries of the Commonwealth. There was no shortage of economic migrants willing to help meet the need, especially among people from those parts of the Commonwealth which suffered political problems of their own, such as Kashmir and Cyprus.

These migrations did not simply involve Muslims. Hindus, Sikhs, and members of other faith communities were also affected, but for a number of different reasons throughout Europe as a whole Muslims from different parts of the Muslim world made up a substantial proportion of the migrant population. In reacting to these changed circumstances, particularly the presence of large numbers of members of other faith communities within European societies, Islam therefore had an especially high profile.

Part of the difficulty with this whole question is caused by the simple fact of the diversity that exists within the Muslim community. Some Muslims, for example, are relatively positive in their assessment of Christianity, stressing the common ground between the two traditions, not least their common monotheism and their common looking towards Abraham as being in some sense their ancestor. Other Muslims, by contrast, seem to be much more critical of Christianity, seeing it as a threat to and an enemy of Islam. This latter

selected readings, Collins (Fount), 1980, pp 82-83. And on the outworking of this view in practice see M Borrmans, *Guidelines for dialogue between Christians and Muslims,* New York, Paulist Press, 1990.

point-of-view must be seen in the context of recent Western influence in the Muslim world, which has contributed to the arousing of a sense of fear in some Muslims which has in turn given rise to a negative view of Christianity not dissimilar from the negative view of Islam which emerged in Western Europe in the Middle Ages. But a Christian assessment of this negative Muslim view may be rather different from any Christian assessment of the stream of Muslim thought which is far more positive towards Christianity. The two varied Muslim approaches cannot necessarily be assessed in the same way.

Whichever stream of Islamic thought is being assessed, however, some thought must be given to certain specific points. For example there is no way around some discussion of the origins of the Islamic community, and in particular of the career of Muhammad and of the contents of the Qur'an.

In the early part of his career Muhammad was essentially the preacher of a message, and the gist of that message can be summarised as 'ethical monotheism.'[15] At its heart was thus a clear and unrelenting insistence that only one God exists, and that He alone is to be worshipped. To worship anything else, a person or an object, is to be guilty of the unforgivable sin of *shirk* or 'association' (of anything else with God in worship). This monotheism in turn, according to Muhammad's preaching, had consequences, for the one true God would in due course judge each individual human being, separating the righteous from the unrighteous, and the criterion for this judgement would be individuals' beliefs and behaviour. Monotheism, in other words, was not simply an abstract doctrine involving belief in the existence of only one God. Rather, it had vital consequences in terms of behaviour.

None of this is unfamiliar to any reader of the Old Testament. Early Old Testament figures such as Gideon and then prophets such as Elijah also fulminated against the worship of anything other than

---

[15] See M Cook, *Muhammad*, OUP, 1983.

the one true God. The later prophets continued that tradition, and added an increasing emphasis on the ethical consequences of monotheism, in terms of social justice and the care of the more vulnerable members of society. Later in the Old Testament, and with ample reinforcement in the teaching of Jesus, the idea of judgement became increasingly prominent, with individuals being separated out by God because of the way they had lived their lives. The parable of the sheep and the goats is perhaps the best-known example of this, and the imagery employed there received further elaboration in the book of Revelation, with its imagery of thrones, the book of life and the separation of humanity into those who were thrown into the lake of fire and those who were permitted the enter the new heaven.[16]

This part of Muhammad's message, then, should firstly be not unfamiliar to most Christians, and secondly should not provoke much dissent from Christians. Rather it could be said that these views should provoke some embarrassment among Christians, since Muslims seem to take them far more seriously than many Christians! Difficulties emerge, though, when we move on to the second half of Muhammad's career, when after his move from Mecca to Medina in 622 A. D. he became a figure of power, a statesman and military leader as well as the proclaimer of a message of ethical monotheism. Some incidents from this period, particularly the use of force against some of the Jewish tribes of Medina, and some of Muhammad's own personal behaviour, particularly with reference to women, have long provoked antagonism from non-Muslims and therefore been prominent themes in attempts to denigrate, if not to vilify, Muhammad's character and integrity.

It is therefore the second half of the Muslim declaration of faith (*shahada*) which causes some difficulty. Christians may have no problem with the first half ('there is no god but God'), but the second ('Muhammad is the messenger of God') may appear an insuperable

---

[16] See, for example, Revelation 20: 11-15. Some of this imagery is further developed in the Qur'an: see D Brady, 'The Qur'an and the book of Revelation – is there a possible literary relationship?' in *Journal of Semitic Studies* 23 (1978), pp 216-225.

problem. Just to make things even more complicated, Muhammad lived after Jesus. Islam is thus the only major post-Christian world faith, and this has contributed towards its being viewed negatively by many Christians who stress the claim that Jesus was the final revelation of God to humankind. And in addition, some of the statements of the Qur'an seem to challenge, if not utterly reject, specific Christian convictions about Jesus. For each of these two reasons, some of the language of the New Testament which referred originally to early heretical Christian groups, has come to be applied in much Christian thought to Muhammad and to Islam.

Examples of this are Revelation 22: 18-19 (anyone who adds to the prophetic words of this book will be accursed), and 1 John 2: 22; 4: 1-3 (anyone who denies that Jesus is the Christ is the Antichrist). One of the achievements of modern Biblical criticism, however, is its insistence on the importance of taking all Scriptural statements in their context. These statements, therefore, must be seen as primarily concerned with the compilation of the book of Revelation and with the preservation of the specificity of the Christian community to which John was writing against unhelpful Gnostic influences. And the Qur'an's statements about Jesus, on the same basis, must be taken in their context. The Qur'an, it is true, is very condemnatory of any use of the term 'son' in the context of Jesus' relationship with God. 'It is not befitting to God that He should beget a son' (chapter 19 verse 35). The Arabian background of the Qur'an must be kept in mind, however, for Mecca, as we have seen, was essentially a polytheistic society, with many gods and goddesses, who intermarried and produced sons and daughters. This the Qur'an abhorred, given its overwhelming insistence upon monotheism. In all probability it was only in the second half of Muhammad's career, in other words in Medina rather than in Mecca, that Muhammad had much first-hand contact with Christians, and given the strong emphasis in his earlier preaching on the inadmissibility of talking about sons and daughters in the context of God, it is not surprising if when he first heard Christian language about Jesus as Son of God, he read it in the same light as Meccan language about sons and daughters, and utterly repudiated it. Whether this was a repudiation of Christian language

about Jesus as Son of God, properly understood, however, is rather questionable. It could be seen instead as a rejection of something which Christians would themselves reject, namely the idea of God sleeping with Mary and producing a son, Jesus, rather in the way that Zeus and other Greek gods periodically slept with human women and produced sons and daughters for themselves.

Care is necessary, then, in interpreting Qur'anic statements about Jesus, and also in interpreting Biblical texts which in their original context were certainly not statements about Islam or Muhammad. Additionally, in looking for a Biblical figure with whom to compare Muhammad, Moses is probably a better focus than Jesus, partly again because of a greater similarity of context between Moses and Muhammad, and partly because Moses seems to have been a much more familiar figure to Muhammad than was Jesus: Moses indeed served as a kind of model for Muhammad, whose struggle against the Meccans was in part inspired by Moses' struggle against Pharoah.[17] Moses, like Muhammad, was also a figure who combined the preaching of a message with the formation and leadership, including military leadership, of a community.

Muhammad's career, then, must be understood, and more importantly evaluated, in its original context, and exactly the same is true of the Qur'an. It cannot be stressed enough, therefore, that the Qur'an is essentially a prophetic book. To compare it with the New Testament in general, or with the Gospels in particular, is thus to compare quite different books. In addition, whereas many of the prophetic books of the Bible begin with the preface 'The word of the Lord came to (for example) Jeremiah: ...' thus locating the prophecy in a particular time and place, the Qur'an omits the preface and simply records what were understood by Muhammad and his contemporaries to be direct words from God. The Qur'an has indeed been called (by R. C. Zaehner)[18] 'the quintessence of prophecy' partly for this reason. Once this crucial fact about the nature and style of the

---

[17] The Qur'an contains 136 references to Moses, and only 36 to Jesus.
[18] See *At sundry times*, Faber and Faber, 1958, p 27.

Muslim Scripture has been grasped it is easier to assess its message.

At the heart of the Qur'an is the call to 'islam,' submission, that is, to the one true God. Human beings are warned of the consequences of not submitting to God, in terms of judgement.[19] Stories are used to reinforce the message, and many of them will not be unfamiliar to anyone who knows the great stories of the Old Testament. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and many others are referred to as earlier examples of those who proclaimed the message of monotheism, and who were sometimes accepted and sometimes rejected and mocked. Later chapters[20] of the Qur'an also include a fair amount of legal material, as they date from the period of Muhammad's career when he was the administrative head of a community and decisions on matters of the regulation of that community needed to be made. Some ten per cent of the Qur'an is therefore what should properly be described as 'law,' and again much of this material bears some considerable similarity to books of the Old Testament.

An analogy which may be helpful for Protestant readers who seek for the first time to read and understand the Qur'an, without any previous experience of the book, may thus be that of reading some of the Old Testament Apocrypha for the first time. There Protestant readers will find books which may seem to have a certain familiar note about them, yet which also have some different features and emphases. And a reading of those apocryphal books, indeed, may actually be helpful for an understanding of the Qur'an, for if human influences are to be sought for some of the stories in the Qur'an, for example, it may well be that post-Old Testament Judaism provides some of them, particularly as transmitted orally in Jewish communities somewhat removed geographically from the main centres of Judaism, as those in Arabia prior to the time of

---

[19] The prophet Ezekiel, of course, also saw himself as a warner, a word which is often repeated in the Qur'an to describe Muhammad's role.

[20] Later chronologically, that is, as the order in which the different chapters are arranged in the Muslim scripture is not chronological.

Muhammad were.[21]

Any even tentative Christian evaluation of Muhammad and the Qur'an must begin with the prophet and the scripture in their original context; and in particular it must be remembered that even if on a strict chronological basis Muhammad lived in a post-Christian era, perhaps a more detailed investigation of his environment may suggest that in many respects it was a pre-Christian one, needing in particular to hear the prophetic message of monotheism with some urgency; and that even if the Qur'an does include some references to Jesus which seem rather negative, they too must be seen in the context of an environment where an accurate appreciation of the reality of Christian language about Jesus was almost impossible.

As we have already seen, medieval western Europe, for a number of reasons, developed a very negative view of Islam, essentially because Islam seemed to be a great threat. Islam appeared threatening partly because of its military success, and in particular because many of the regions in which Christianity had itself first spread – Palestine, Egypt, Syria for example – quickly fell under Islamic rule, so that Islam seemed to be achieving success at the specific expense of the Christian world; and partly because of its more specifically theological claim to be a divine corrective to certain errors which had crept into the Christian church during the course of its history. Islam was thus at the very least a major challenge to the Christian church on both a practical and a more theoretical level.

---

[21] There are some very interesting parallels between some of the language used of God in the Old Testament Apocrypha and that of the Qur'an. See, for example, 2 Esdras 7:132-133: 'I know that the Most High is called "compassionate" ... and "merciful"'; Ecclesiasticus 2:11: 'For the Lord is compassionate and merciful'; and The Prayer of Manasseh 7: 'For you are Lord Most High, compassionate, patient, and of great mercy.' Cf. 2 Chronicles 30:9.

The challenge of Islam on each of these levels must also be seen in its context, however. The military success of Islam was certainly a major challenge to the Christian Byzantine Empire, which lost the provinces of Palestine, Egypt and Syria to Muslim rulers within some 20 years of Muhammad's death, just as it was later a challenge to Western Europe when North Africa and Spain were conquered in the late 7th and early 8th centuries. But the conquered population was in most cases allowed to retain its Christian faith; there were few instances of forced conversion to Islam. And many of the conquered Christians actively welcomed Muslim rule, on the simple grounds that it was more tolerant than Byzantine rule. Here it is important to note that large elements of the population of the conquered provinces were Monophysite or Nestorian, and the reason for the welcome given by them to the Muslim conquerors was quite simply that, unlike the Byzantines, the Muslims did not persecute and harass Christians who had not accepted the definitions of Christian belief formulated by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A. D.

Not all Christians thus found the coming of Islam a threat; some, indeed, praised God for the coming of the Muslims, as they had liberated them from the harsh yoke of the Byzantines, who called themselves Christians, but in the eyes of Monophysites and Nestorians were harsh agents of persecution. The practical context within which relationships between Christians and Muslims were worked out must therefore always be kept in mind.

In its early centuries Islam also underwent a process of theological elaboration and systematisation. In many respects Muslims had to confront many of the same problems as had the early Christian church, particularly the question of the relationship between the knowledge obtained from its own distinctive sources of revelation and guidance, that is the Qur'an and the example of Muhammad, and other already-existing sources of knowledge, such as Greek philosophy and other monotheistic religious communities such as the Christian and Jewish ones. In exactly the same way, in the Patristic period, the Fathers of the Christian church had wrestled with the question of how they should evaluate Greek philosophy and how they should relate to Judaism.

This too must be seen in context. In the early Islamic centuries, in places like Palestine, Egypt and Syria, Muslims were a small minority of the population. They were the rulers of these provinces, it is true, but as is the case in any similar situation, one of the rulers' major concerns was the preservation of their distinctive identity, and thus preventing assimilation into the conquered population. Put crudely, the early Muslim rulers were concerned to preserve their distinctiveness from the local population. Initially this could be achieved on the basis of ethnic and linguistic distinctiveness: the rulers were Arabs, members of Arab tribes, speaking the Arabic language, and Islam, initially at least, seems to have been thought of primarily as a faith for the Arabs. After a century or so of Islamic rule, however, by which time the continued existence of the Islamic Empire was no longer at risk, the idea of Islam as a universal faith began to gain further credence, and so ethnic and linguistic factors became less significant in preserving the distinctive identity of the rulers than more specifically religious ones. Islam itself, therefore, began to serve as the agent of distinctiveness, as it were, and so there began the process of the theological elaboration of Islam.

In part this was influenced by Christian ideas. The Christian church, after all, had already elaborated a theological system of some sophistication, and so, as Muslims began to discuss questions such as the relationship between God's omnipotence and human freedom, Christian ideas on these subjects were one of the sources of information available to Muslims discussing them. Yet even while drawing on Christian sources, to some extent at least, it was clearly essential for the Muslim community to preserve its distinctive identity, and not be too greatly or too overtly influenced by Christian thinking.

It was in this context, then, that as part of its own internal theological elaboration, Islam developed a more systematic critique of Christian beliefs and practices, building upon some of the statements in the Qur'an which seemed to be critical of some aspects of Christianity, but also going much further. The main lines of this more thorough Muslim review read in some ways rather like 19th century liberal Protestant views. They concentrate particularly on how

in the early Christian centuries the Christian church was substantially influenced by Hellenistic ideas, which led to the corruption of the original message of Jesus through the adoption of ideas such as Incarnation and Trinity. Through this argument Muslims, like liberal Protestants such as von Harnack, could retain their claim to be respecters and indeed followers of Jesus, while dissociating themselves from the way in which the Christian church developed in its early centuries.

Liberal Protestants were particularly concerned with the corruption of Christian doctrine in the early Christian centuries. They were perhaps less concerned with matters of Christian practice, but issues in this field were also an important preoccupation for Muslims, who seem to have drawn on Jewish arguments also in order to support their contention that the early Christians corrupted the original message of Jesus by insisting that the Jewish Law was no longer valid for Christians. Thus, medieval Muslim writers argued, Jesus abstained from pork, was circumcised, and obeyed the Law in other respects too, while Christians had ceased to do so, and the fact that Muslims also followed these stipulations meant that Muslims were actually more faithful followers of Jesus' own example than Christians!

In the medieval period, then, Islam elaborated its own theological system. Sometimes it was influenced by Christian thinking on particular subjects, though this borrowing was not always explicitly acknowledged. Yet even more importantly, in many respects the Islamic system evolved in conscious opposition to the existing Christian one. Muslims needed to preserve their own identity and distinctiveness, and in addition to justify their own claim that Islam was a faith sent by God, and the more systematic critique of Christian beliefs and practices which evolved in this period must be seen in this context.

In a worldwide context, the period since roughly A. D. 1500 has been a period of dramatic change. It has seen the expansion of European influence throughout the whole globe, and within Europe it has seen

Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment. With respect to the Islamic world, by contrast, this period has been less notable. Intellectually, the golden age of Islamic civilization, with its great achievements in the fields of science and medicine as well as in the arts and in religion, had passed, and, politically and militarily, far from maintaining the success and influence which the Islamic world had enjoyed in its early centuries, Islamic societies had to endure defeat and subjection by foreign powers, mostly European ones. In modern centuries, then, power has tended to lie with the West, and the Islamic world has been victim, rather than threat.

Today, however, the situation perhaps looks rather different again from the prevailing circumstances of the last two centuries or so. European colonialism has been rolled back in the era since World War II. There are stirrings of what is loosely called 'The Islamic revival' in different parts of the world. Thanks to the geography of the areas in which oil has been discovered, there is fresh appreciation of the economic power which lies in the hands of the governments of certain part of the Muslim world. And, last but by no means least, as a result of migration, significant Muslim communities have been established in parts of the world where traditionally there has been no Muslim presence, and where Christianity has been the ancestral faith of the majority of the population – particularly in Europe, but also in the United States and in the 'White Commonwealth' (Canada, Australia etc). How are these changes to be understood, and how are they relevant to any attempt at a contemporary Christian assessment of Islam?

For some people, these changes are understood in such a way as to reinforce the old image of Islam as a threat. This is particularly the case, perhaps, for those who have a special interest, for whatever reason, in the state of Israel, especially if its creation in 1948 is understood, as it is by some Christians, as being in some way an act of God and a sign of the imminence of the Second Coming of Christ. Given that the majority of those who suffered as a result of the creation of the state of Israel are Muslims (though it must be remembered that some ten per cent of the Palestinians are Christian), it is not surprising if Muslim opinion is significant among those in

opposition to the state of Israel. But that opposition does not necessarily mean that Islam should be seen as a threat in the way that it was interpreted by medieval Western Christians.

In a more specifically British context, many of the developments which have taken place since 1945 with reference to the Islamic world are certainly challenging, both for British society in general and for the Christian church in particular, but a challenge is not necessarily the same as a threat, and therefore it is again important to see these developments in their context. This is particularly true with reference to the new Muslim presence within Britain.

It is perhaps helpful to begin with some statistics: the Muslim population of the U. K. is now probably something in the region of 1 million, or around 2 per cent of the population. This means that the Muslim community is over twice as large, and possibly three times as large, as the well-established Jewish community in Britain. Like that Jewish community, the Muslim community is overwhelmingly concentrated in the urban areas of Britain. Most of the Muslims in Britain have arrived since 1945, but over 50 per cent of Muslims in Britain today were born in Britain, and have therefore been educated in Britain. The Muslim community may be the largest of the 'new' immigrant communities, but there are also, of course, significant Hindu and Sikh communities as well.

How did the Muslim community come to be established in Britain? Here the crucial factor is an economic one. In the years after the end of World War II, as the British economy re-adjusted to peace-time, a considerable shortage of labour was quickly experienced. The solution was to import labour from other parts of the British Commonwealth, and so it was for this reason that migrant workers from the Indian Subcontinent moved to Britain in large numbers. This process was stimulated by the granting of independence to the Subcontinent in 1947, which resulted in the creation of the new states of Pakistan and India and the uprooting of large numbers of people

from their traditional homes, particularly in states such as Kashmir, which was divided between Pakistan and India.[22]

This was by no means a new or a unique process. In Britain, ever since the Industrial Revolution there had been periods of labour shortage, and this had traditionally been met by migration from Ireland. The largest 'ethnic minority' in mainland Britain is thus the Irish, usually put at around three million. And the importation of labour from more distant parts of what was then the British Empire was not new either, for the process had in fact begun during the Second World War when large numbers of workers were brought to Britain in order to man the munitions factories. The land for the mosque in Regent's Park in London was given to the Muslim community by King George VI in 1944 as a token of appreciation for the efforts of the Muslim citizens of the Empire on its behalf during the war.

Something similar was also taking place in most other western European states. Driven by the same economic requirements, labour was imported to a number of countries from former imperial or colonial territories, for example North Africans to France and Indonesians to Holland. Those countries which did not have such territories turned either to poorer European countries or to other states with which they had developed links earlier in the century. For this reason large numbers of Yugoslavs and Turks migrated to West Germany, and there was also some migration from Italy, Spain and Portugal to other richer northern European countries. In western Europe as a whole, therefore, as well as in Britain, the Muslim community is now the second largest religious community, and the single country in which Muslims make up the largest proportion of the population is France, where there are some two million Muslims, about 4% of the population.

---

[22] The same is true, on a smaller scale, with reference to Cyprus, where difficulties between Greek and Turkish Cypriots resulted in the migration of members of both communities to Britain.

This is certainly a challenge, in the general spheres of education and social welfare, as well as in the more specific fields of race/community relations and, last but by no means least, the field of religion. Challenges are often uncomfortable, not least because they make many previously unquestioned assumptions rather hard to sustain, but they are often a necessary part of change, and, to repeat, a challenge is not the same as a threat. Membership of the European Community also poses many challenges, and while that too is perceived by some as a threat, it is surely also an opportunity. We are all citizens of one world now.

3.   Some practical issues

> *The Satanic Verses* in 1988, and the ensuing *fatwa* (legal pronouncement) by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, declaring the author to be among 'those whose blood must be shed.' Issues raised in the wake of these events have been as varied as the inviolability of freedom of speech, the usefulness of the laws of blasphemy in England, the extent of Muslim respect for international law, and the question of the loyalties of the Muslim community in Britain, and deep passions have therefore been stirred in many different quarters.[23]

Muslim passions were first aroused by the book because of what it was regarded as stating concerning Muhammad and the Qur'an, in particular the suggestion that they were less than perfect. This was based on the story (recorded by some early Muslim biographers of Muhammad, but not all) that at one stage of his career Muhammad had recited some verses which at the time he took to have come from God, but which he later retracted, arguing that they had instead come from Satan (the incident which gives the book its

---

[23] For further detail on what has become known as the Rushdie affair, see M Ruthven, *A Satanic affair*, 2nd ed., Chatto and Windus, 1991, and my article 'Stranger than fiction: the affair of "The Satanic Verses"' in *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 12 (1991), PP 88-106.

title). To conservative Muslim opinion, and to Ayatollah Khomeini in particular, Rushdie's interpretation of this story was in opposition to Islam, Muhammad and the Qur'an.

The passages in which these issues are discussed are only a small part of the book, which also ranges widely across many aspects of contemporary British, Indian and Pakistani societies, and the interrelationships between them, and included in this discussion, much of which is critical of all three, there are powerful, thinly-veiled, criticisms of a number of conservative Muslim leaders in different areas of the world, Ayatollah Khomeini included. The intimation is thus that *some* current trends in Islamic thought are obscurantist and reactionary, and this is clearly not irrelevant to the very negative reaction to the book in *some* Muslim quarters.

It is important to remember, therefore, that the way the book was received cannot be separated from the wider disputes which are currently raging within the Muslim world as a whole between broadly 'progressive' streams of thought and more 'conservative' ones. In this, of course, the Muslim world is no different from the Christian one, but what makes the situation more complex in the Muslim context is the generally closer association in Muslim societies between religious and political forces.[24] And the fact that different Muslim countries are in a sense rivals for the position of leader of Islam is again not irrelevant to Ayatollah Khomeini's decree, as it may be interpreted in part at least as a bid for the title of 'most vigorous defender of Islam' throughout the whole world.

Not all Muslims, therefore, either agreed with or supported the *fatwa*. But significant elements of the Muslim community did seem to do so, and part of the reason for this is the fact that over half

---

[24] This is in part due to the traditional teaching concerning the comprehensive nature of Islam, and to Muhammad's own example, but the whole process of secularisation in a Western context also needs to be kept in mind in looking at the contemporary situation. Christians should perhaps think back to the Wars of Religion in 16th and 17th century Europe to be reminded that there are certain parallels to today's Muslim situation, at least, in the Christian past.

of the Muslims in Britain trace their ancestry back to the Indian subcontinent, where historically there has been a tendency to make the person of Muhammad a focus of devotion, rather than centring the faith on the Qur'an. Language is clearly important here, given that Arabic is not the everyday language of the subcontinent's Muslims, and there has been strong resistance on the part of the religious leaders of the Muslim world to any idea of authorising official translations of the Qur'an.[25] But whatever the reason, Rushdie's apparent slur on Muhammad's integrity certainly provoked considerable anger.[26]

Initially this anger was expressed perfectly legally, in newspaper advertisements protesting against it and in attempts in the courts to have the book withdrawn or revised in some way. All of these attempts, however, failed, and it is important to remember that there was a period of some six months between the publication of the book and the issuing of the *fatwa*, when all Muslim protests were in general either ignored or ridiculed. It is perfectly reasonable, therefore, to ask, albeit with the benefit of hindsight, whether things had to come to the pitch that they did.

The two main issues arising from the controversy, then as now, in Britain, are the law of blasphemy and the law of censorship. Muslims argued that the book was blasphemous, and that it should therefore be censored, but were stymied on both counts, for the law of blasphemy, as currently on the statute book, does not protect the name of God (the original meaning of the word), or even the Christian faith, but rather the Church of England only; and the law of censorship in most cases only applies to certain media, so that films to be shown in cinemas still begin with a certificate of authorisation

---

[25] Again there is an obvious parallel in Christian history here: it is only necessary to mention the names of William Tyndale and Miles Coverdale to be reminded that at some periods of Christian history attempting to translate the Bible was itself a life-threatening activity (though other factors were also, of course, involved).

[26] Other religious figures are also negatively described in the book: Abraham, for example, is described at one point as a 'bastard.'

from the censor, but books are normally not inspected for approval or otherwise.

But these facts did not prevent the British government from trying, through the courts, to prevent the publication of a book, Peter Wright's *Spycatcher*, while at the same time protesting that it was powerless to prevent publication of *The Satanic Verses*. And other religious communities have recently been successful in efforts to prevent the making available of material in other media which they considered offensive: the Archbishop of Canterbury's recent protest to the BBC over its plan to screen 'The Last Temptation of Christ' on BBC2 resulted in its cancellation, and the Jewish community's protests over the play 'Perdition,' which argued that the Holocaust was a historical myth, also resulted in its withdrawal from the London stage. Given these successes, which seem to point to a denial of equal treatment for different religious communities by the law, and point to differing degrees of access to power, it should not be a complete surprise if there is considerable resentment in the Muslim community because of its feeling that double standards are being applied.[27]

Should the law of blasphemy then be changed? Even before the controversy over Rushdie's novel, the Archbishop of Canterbury (Robert Runcie) had already suggested that the terms of the law should be broadened to protect the sensibilities of other religious

---

[27] Another area of the law on which Christians are currently campaigning, along with others, concerns the Sunday trading laws, though there is a certain irony here in that letters to the government protesting about its unwillingness to act against the flouting of the law have been signed not only by the Archbishops of Canterbury and Westminster but also by the Chief Rabbi! Other questions produce differing alliances and coalitions: on that of the legality of slaughtering animals according to traditional religious methods, the Jewish and Muslim communities have united in arguing for it to continue to be allowed, while one of the leading figures in the campaign to forbid it (on the grounds that it was cruel to animals and therefore infringed animal rights) during the 1980's was an Anglican clergyman. Living in a multi-religious society is nothing if not complex, but, even in the period when England was much more uniformly Christian, that did not prevent some passionate arguments emerging.

communities, but the practical difficulty is an obvious one, namely that of where to draw the boundaries.[28] A more practical suggestion might therefore be the introduction of an offence of religious incitement, which locates the whole question in the more practical realm of considering the consequences of a particular work, and which is already on the statute book for Northern Ireland.[29] But there are also problems with this solution.[30]

The whole question of censorship is also, of course, an extremely emotive one, but in a situation where, as outlined above, some religious communities in Britain are able to secure the withdrawal of material that is offensive to them, it is important that Muslim sensibilities are at least taken seriously and Muslim concerns are not simply mocked. In the case of *The Satanic Verses*, of course, the criticisms of certain leaders and trends in the Muslim world are partly responsible for the furious reaction from some Muslims; prophetic criticism of men of religion may therefore be justified, and should be protected from attempts at censorship. But on the other hand the book itself asks the question 'to whom are religious leaders accountable for their pronouncements (especially if uttered confidently in the name of God)' and the same question may also be asked of writers of fiction – to whom are they accountable?

More recently the outbreak of armed conflict between Iraq, a country the majority of whose population is Muslim, and an international coalition under United Nations auspices but in practice very much

---

[28] It has been suggested, for example, that some of the Qur'an's statements about Jesus, which appear to reject any idea of his having a father/son relationship with God, might be considered blasphemous to some Christians. (See the discussion above, however, on the importance of understanding these Qur'anic statements in their Arabian context.)

[29] Northern Ireland is also, as a matter of interest, the only part of the United Kingdom in which discrimination on the basis of religion is actually illegal.

[30] On this see especially *Law, blasphemy and the multi-faith society*, Commission for racial equality and Inter-Faith Network, 1990.

led by Western military commanders, has brought certain other issues to the surface.[31] The conflict was sometimes described, by people on both sides, as being in some respects at least a conflict between Christianity and Islam. The government of Iraq tried to play 'the Islamic card' by inviting some Muslim leaders from different parts of the Muslim world to Baghdad shortly before the outbreak of hostilities, and then enjoying their declaration at the end of the meeting that a *jihad* or holy war should be declared against the opponents of Iraq.[32] Likewise, Western military personnel sometimes portrayed the conflict in terms of Christian-Muslim confrontation: according to *The Times* of 23.1.1991 the message 'Hussein, if Allah does not answer, ask for Jesus' was painted onto some of the bombs which were dropped on Iraqi targets during the war.

In reality, of course, it was not a conflict between the two faiths at all. Some five per cent of the population of Iraq is Christian, mostly belonging to the ancient Nestorian church (and its Roman Catholic and Protestant off-shoots resulting from Western missionary work), and no less a person than the Foreign Minister of Iraq in the lead-up to the war, Tariq Aziz, is Christian. Equally, on the side of the international coalition there were a number of nations the majority of whose population is Muslim. The coalition could hardly have come into being without Sa'udi Arabian participation, and a number of other Arab nations, whose governments were concerned with the balance of power within the Arab world, also joined. Religious factors were not therefore an essential part of the conflict.

Yet in the minds of some people, the conflict was interpreted rather in terms of the old medieval image of Islam as threat, and this

---

[31] For a more detailed discussion on this subject see my 'The Gulf crisis – past, present and future' in *Southwell and Oxford papers on contemporary society*, Summer 1991, pp HG1-14.

[32] With respect to *jihad* it is important to remember that the literal meaning of the Arabic word is simply struggle, and it has two main senses in Islamic thought, the first being the *military* struggle, usually to be undertaken in defence of Islam (and not, therefore, including offensive action), and the second being the *spiritual* sense of the interior spiritual struggle which goes on inside all Muslims.

did have certain consequences for the situation in Britain. A number of mosques received threatening telephone calls, and some were physically threatened and even desecrated. In reality, some Muslims in Britain, not least those who had earlier received financial support from Iraq, were sympathetic towards Iraq, but on this, as over the Rushdie affair, the Muslim community was in practice divided, and for the whole community to be accused of sympathy for Iraq did not correspond to reality. Yet it was undoubtedly a time of some stress in the relations between the different faith communities in Britain, and efforts have had to be made to undo some of the suspicions which the conflict generated in certain localities.

The Muslim presence in Britain also raises a number of issues more particularly for Christians. For example, in certain parts of the country church schools find that over 90 per cent of their pupils belong to faiths other than Christianity, and parishes and congregations discover that over 90 per cent of the population within their boundaries is, say, Muslim. This is clearly not what was envisaged when the schools and parishes were established: the whole organization of these things when they were set up was based on the premise that the whole, or at least the vast majority of the population, would be members of the Christian church. Suddenly things look very different. On a more personal level, Christians find themselves neighbours to Muslim families. They may have to learn a tremendous amount in a very short time, with precious little help available, in order even to fulfil the basic human courtesy of saying 'Good morning' to their new neighbours, let alone doing anything more substantial in order to be a good neighbour. Clearly this is very challenging.[33]

---

[33] A very useful guide to practical issues such as this, especially for women, is M Burness, *What shall I say to my Muslim friends?*, Church Missionary Society, 1989. For much useful advice and guidance on other areas of Christian inter-faith encounter, see R Hooker and C Lamb, *Love the stranger: Christian ministry in*

In this context a number of issues quickly arise, and what is true on a local neighbourhood level is also true on a national level. How should Christians and the church react to the new Muslim (or other) presence? Is this a golden opportunity for Christian evangelism? Is it rather an opportunity for dialogue between different faiths? What about inter-faith worship – is this possible, or desirable? Many issues quickly come to the fore, and help in seeking to wrestle with them is not always to hand, so it is important to address them here.

Particular urgency has been given to these issues by the circulation, to the clergy of the Church of England, of a recent 'Open Letter,' inviting signature with a view to publication in *The Church Times*. The letter, with the list of some 2,000 signatories, was published in December 1991, and discussed two main themes: firstly, in connection with the Decade of Evangelism, it argued against any exclusion of members of other faiths from being targets of Christian evangelism during the Decade; and secondly, it sought to prevent the use of Anglican church buildings for inter-faith worship of any kind. The circulation of the letter caused a considerable furore, provoking a large amount of correspondence in *The Church Times* even in advance of the publication of the letter.

One interesting thing has already happened as a result of publicity about the letter: a number of those who signed it have already distanced themselves to some extent from its first theme.[34] Among some signatories, therefore, it was clearly the second issue which was felt to be more important than the first. A particular focus of unease, as expressed in the publicity which accompanied the letter, is the annual Commonwealth Day Service in Westminster Abbey,

---

multi-faith areas, SPCK, 1986.

[34] See for example Gavin Reid of the Church Pastoral Aid Society, (reported in *The Church Times* of 18th October 1991), saying that there were no specific plans to target members of other faiths during the Decade, and John Goldingay, the Principal of St John's College, Nottingham, who in an article in the same issue of *The Church Times* suggested that it was primarily concern over inter-faith worship which was the reason for his signing the letter.

when, in the presence usually of the Queen, representatives of the different nations of the Commonwealth in London meet in the Abbey for a service of readings, prayers and reflection.

It is an obvious point that the Commonwealth is a multi-religious as well as multi-national organization. It is hard to see, therefore, how any occasion of a religious kind involving its different members could be mono-religious, especially since Christians are, in all probability, a minority amongst its population. It has been suggested that part of the problem is the holding of the service in Westminster Abbey and that a more suitable venue might be a secular building of some kind, but given the position of the Abbey as a kind of national shrine, clearly much of the impact of the service would be lost were it to be held elsewhere. In addition, elsewhere in England, particularly in some cathedrals (according to the information circulated with the Open Letter), there have on a number of occasions been services of inter-faith worship. The background and context within which these occasions have been organized is not clear, but it is reasonable to assume that they have been occasional, if not one-off occasions, and it is important to keep this in mind. It is at best intermittent, rather than regular, inter-faith worship which is at issue here.

On civic occasions, given the presence of large numbers of members of other faiths in Britain, it seems thoroughly appropriate to include representatives of those other faiths. On Remembrance Day, for example, it is simply not the case that all those who gave their lives fighting for Britain in the two World Wars were, even in the broadest sense, Christian. Indian troops fought in the trenches in World War I.[35] The World War II cemeteries in the Middle East include graves for Muslims, Jews and Hindus as well as Christians. It seems ungrateful, to say the least, to exclude all reference to these

---

[35] The experience was also one of the major factors in disillusioning many Indians with Western Civilization, given that what they had always been told of the benefits of Christian Civilization seemed to amount to senseless slaughter of each other, by two Christian nations, each convinced that God was on its side.

facts, on principle, from Remembrance Day commemorations.

Equally, with reference to the Gulf War in 1991, given the stress that was constantly laid by western political leaders that the conflict was in no sense a religious one between Islam and Christianity, and given that on both sides there were Christians and Muslims, it seems strange to seek to prohibit some kind of reference to these facts in religious services after the conclusion of the fighting, though what kind of reference clearly needs careful thought.[36]

Inter-faith worship of certain kinds may therefore be thoroughly appropriate on certain occasions and in certain settings. This does not mean, however, that such occasions should be part of anyone's staple diet of worship. In the light of history, it is extremely unlikely anyway that they ever would: think of recent schemes for Christian unity and of how many have foundered because of the reluctance of different Christian congregations and denominations to give up their traditional style of worship, or even to seek to combine it with different styles of Christian worship. Given that the signatories of 'The Open Letter' included both those from the Catholic wing of the Church of England and from its Evangelical wing, a cynic might even with some justification wonder how often the signatories themselves worship together! Part of the attraction of inter-faith worship in some cases may simply be its novelty, and while to point that out is in no way meant to denigrate its value, it does highlight the fact that it is unlikely to provide regular sustenance for members of any religious community. It may, and should, serve as a powerful symbol of the willingness of different religious communities to

---

[36] One interesting consequence of the fact that Western forces were present in large numbers in Sa'udi Arabia was that when a new airbase was opened, an American Roman Catholic military chaplain was permitted to say a prayer of dedication for it. This was quite possibly the first time since the time of Muhammad that a Christian prayer has been publicly said in what is now Sa'udi Arabia. In addition, in a British context, before the outbreak of hostilities, a number of mosques invited local Christian clergy to join their members for prayers for peace, and in one case, in Derby, the Anglican priest was invited to pray publicly, and the occasion was broadcast on the local television news.

demonstrate their friendship for each other, and their common citizenship either of a particular nation or simply of the world, but that does not mean that they are likely to blend into each other and lose their distinctive identity.

What then of the other issue raised in the Open Letter, namely evangelism? As already mentioned, a number of the signatories of the letter subsequently distanced themselves from this part of the letter, and a simple analogy may help to indicate the wisdom of their course of action. What would the reaction of Christians in Britain be if, say in Pakistan, the Ministry of Religious Affairs declared that the next ten years were to be a time in which efforts were going to be made to strengthen the level of observance of Islam in the country as a whole, and that non-Muslims were going to be a particular target of this endeavour? Apart from a certain contradiction between the self-proclaimed aim of strengthening the level of observance of Islam on the one hand and targeting non-Muslims on the other, the whole exercise would surely arouse a certain amount of anxiety among the Christian population of the country, and Christians elsewhere would probably manifest some concern too. The point is obvious. Even if British Christians are quite confident themselves that their targeting of members of other faiths during the Decade of Evangelism will not be hostile and will not involve any unfair pressure, that is not how it may appear to the members of those other faith communities, given that even the relatively large communities, such as the Muslim one, are still only small minorities in the country as a whole.

Clearly the Anglican context of the 'Open Letter' is important here. In the light of the diversity of opinion which exists within the Anglican church, in Britain in particular, on such questions as attitudes towards other faiths and evangelism, the letter should be understood essentially as part of an internal debate concerning these questions and as an attempt by the proponents of one view to persuade the leadership of the Church of England to act in a particular way. The central issue is therefore the question of what the gospel is and whether it is for all or only for some. An 'Open Letter,' however, at risk of stating the obvious, is an open letter, and even if it

is addressed to the leadership of the Church of England it cannot be assumed that they will be its only readership. And once the letter was published and entered the public domain it was clear that it caused a considerable amount of concern to members of other faith communities in Britain, particularly the Jewish community.[37]

A better proposition may therefore be some kind of inter-faith dialogue. Dialogue is one of those words which means many different things to many different people, and there are perhaps as many definitions of it as there are people who think and talk about it. For some the whole idea smacks of compromise, seeming as it does to ascribe as much credibility to another faith as to one's own. For others dialogue involves simply listening to others' points-of-view and any expression of one's own is ruled out-of-court. Each of these views, however, is rather extreme. Somewhere between them is a view of dialogue which sees it as a basic condition of human interaction, the alternatives to which are simply a monologue or a total silence.

In dialogue members of different communities of faith meet, and may do different things when they meet. They may sometimes discuss belief and theology. If they are neighbours they may discuss and seek action on matters which concern all people, regardless of faith. In inner city areas, for example, health care, law and order, the state of the schools and the state of the streets are matters of concern to all local residents regardless of their faith, and so members of different communities may act together to lobby the authorities on these matters. They may visit each others' homes, community centres and places of worship. Meeting on all sorts of different levels is possible, and all, in some way, may be considered to be part of dialogue. Normally, any serious member of any religious community will hope that through his or her actions and deeds something of their faith will be made known. Christians will hope that what they

---

[37] One interesting response to the Decade of Evangelism has been the decision of some of these other religious communities in Britain to organise their own equivalent ventures such as the 'Decade of renewal' in the Jewish community and the 'Decade of revivalism' in the Muslim community. (See *The Times*, 20.12.1991).

say and do, and, perhaps particularly importantly, how they do it, will manifest something of their Lord and Saviour. Thus they will witness to their faith and convictions. But nearly all modern studies of communication indicate that it is the manner which is at least as important as the words in making known a message, and the idea of dialogue, particularly when it is not simply defined in terms of verbal dialogue, stresses that clearly.[38]

---

[38] A simple (true) story may illustrate this: an adult (male) member of another faith community expressed the wish to become a Christian. When asked what had caused him to make this request, he replied that some twenty years earlier, when he was a small boy, the Anglican priest who lived next door to his family had helped his mother carry the shopping home. He had been flabbergasted: 'white men don't do that sort of thing,' he had said to his mother, and the incident had left such a powerful impression that some considerable time later he had decided that he wished to become a Christian. Such an outcome was almost certainly very far from the mind of the priest at the time, yet that was the result of his action, of which he had no recollection at all when the man later came to him to make his request.

Islam, along with other faiths, is thus certainly something of a challenge to Christians in Britain today. The existence of a Muslim community of some one million members in Britain means that Islam is no longer something 'out there,' which can be thought about and commented upon in a theoretical and abstract way. Rather Islam is now a matter of more immediate import. It is therefore important that Christians know something of Islam, in order to be sure that in thinking and speaking of it they are dealing with the reality of Islam and not with some myth or caricature deriving from a stereotype from the past. Only then can even a tentative attempt at some kind of assessment of Islam begin to be made.

In that assessment, it must be remembered that Muslims have a living and active faith in one God, who alone must be worshipped. Muslims have also a deep and profound respect for Jesus, even if they regard some of the things which Christians affirm about Jesus as unpalatable. Christians and Muslims clearly differ. Yet these apparent rejections of Christian convictions must be seen in their original context: they may be not so much rejections as misunderstandings, needing some further examination, just as the traditional negative Christian views of Muhammad and the Qur'an may need some re-considering. Islam, therefore, should not be seen as a threat. Certainly it poses some hard questions for Christians, about Christian belief and about the level of Christian practice (or lack of it) in Britain today, but those hard questions may themselves provide an opportunity for Christian witness, provided it is carried out thoughtfully and reflectively.

In Christian witness in general, and with reference to Christian reflection on Islam in particular, two further New Testament texts may usefully be kept in mind: firstly Matthew 7:3-5 (and parallel in Luke 6:37-42) 'Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye, with never a thought for the great

plank in your own?'; and secondly John 8:7, 'let him who is innocent among you cast the first stone.'[39] Any witness, therefore, and any attempt at an assessment of another faith, must also involve a considerable measure of self-criticism. Islam, and Muslims, have often been judged harshly by Christians, yet it is important to remember that many of the things for which they are today condemned by many Christians are things which the Christian church has itself been guilty of in the past. Additionally, much of the motivation for these condemnations of Islam arises from the long-established feeling that Islam is in some way a threat. Yet it is perhaps rather the case that Islam is extremely challenging to many Christians in a great many different respects, not least because of the devotion and willingness to make sacrifices which it arouses in so many of the members of the Muslim community worldwide. And if that is the case, Islam may actually in some ways be an example to Christians.

---

[39] According to David Hare's play about the contemporary state of the Church of England, 'Racing Demon,' this verse is the Anglican Church's favourite text.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

General introductory books:
a) by western writers:
J. L. Esposito, *Islam – the straight path*, O.U.P., 1988.
M. Ruthven, *Islam in the world*, 2nd ed., Penguin, 1991.
A. Rippin, *Muslims: their beliefs and practices, I: the formative period*, Routledge, 1990.

b) by Muslim authors:
F. Rahman, *Islam*, 2nd ed, University of Chicago Press, 1979.
S. H. Nasr*, Ideals and realities of Islam*, 2nd ed., George Allen and Unwin, 1975.
A. S. Ahmed, *Discovering Islam*, Routledge, 1988.

Biographies of Muhammad:
a) by western writers:
M. Cook, *Muhammad*, O.U.P., 1983.
M. Rodinson, *Mohammed*, Penguin, 1971.

b) by Muslim writers:
M. Lings, *Muhammad,* George Allen and Unwin, 1983.
M. Hayka, *The life of Muhammad*, Shorouk International, 1983.

English language versions of the Qur'an:
A. J. Arberry, *The Koran*, O.U.P., 1964.
M. M. Pickthall, *The meaning of the glorious Qur'an*, Mentor, n.d.
A, Y. Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, Leicester, Islamic Foundation, 1975.

Books about the Qur'an:
W. M. Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an*, Edinburgh U.P., 1970.
F. Rahman, *Major themes of the Qur'an*, Minneapolis, Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980.
K. Cragg, *Readings in the Qur'an*, Collins, 1988.

Worship and spirituality:
G. E. von Grunebaum, *Muhammadan Festivals*, Curzon Press, 1976.
S. H. Nasr (ed.), *Islamic spirituality: I – foundations; II manifestations*, SCM, 1989 and 1991.

Modern developments in Islam:

E. Mortimer, *Faith and power: the politics of Islam*, Faber, 1982.

J. L. Esposito (ed.), *Voices of resurgent Islam*, O.U.P., 1983.

J. J. Donohue and J.L. Esposito (eds.), *Islam in transition*, O.U.P., 1982.

Islam in Britain and Europe:

J.S. Nielsen, *Muslims in Western Europe*, Edinburgh U.P., 1992.

C. Waddy, *Shaping a new Europe: the Muslim factor*, Grosvenor Books, 1991.

M. S. Raza, *Islam in Britain*, Leicester, Volcano Books, 1991.

Christian reflections on Islam:

A. K. Cragg, *The call of the minaret*, 2nd ed., Collins, 1986.

J. Jomie, *How to understand Islam*, SCM, 1989.

Muslim perceptions of Jesus and of Christians:

G. Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an*, Sheldon Press, 1976.

N. Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, Macmillan, 1991.

J. D. McAuliff, *Qur'anic Christians*, C.U.P., 1991.

History of Christian-Muslim relations:

W. M. Watt, *Muslim-Christian encounters: perceptions and misperceptions*, Routledge, 1991.

Christian-Muslim dialogue:

Muslim-Christian Research Group, *The challenge of the Scriptures: Bible and Our'an*, Orbis, 1989.

A. Wingate, *Encounter in the spirit*, 2nd ed., World Council of Churches, 1991.

1.1.1.1. Latimer Publications