

# Muslim scholar engages

Philip Lewis praises an essay in empathy

**Christians, Muslims and Jesus**  
Mona Siddiqui  
Yale £20  
(978-0-300-16970-6)  
Church Times Bookshop £18

THIS landmark study of the figure of Christ by a Muslim scholar is both a personal voyage of discovery and a sourcebook. As Professor of Islamic and Interreligious Studies at Edinburgh University, Mona Siddiqui (Back Page Interview, 10 May) regrets the paucity of Muslim thinkers with a theological interest in Christianity. This lacuna she seeks to address in six substantive chapters.

The first — “The End of Prophecy” — makes it clear why both traditions have difficulty in under-

standing the other within their own religious logic. For Muslims, Jesus is a revered prophet; for Christians, he is the Messiah and Son of God. “If Muhammad is the recipient of divine words, Jesus is the embodiment of the Word... It is therefore not surprising that there is a struggle [for Christians] to find an adequate response to Muhammad as the final Prophet when the final Word has already appeared.”

Two subsequent chapters provide an accessible historic overview of mutual apologetics and polemics about the figure of Jesus: the first largely focuses on Christians writing within the Muslim world in the eighth and ninth centuries. This means Orthodox (Melkite), Nestorian, and Jacobite Syrian Christians. The second focuses on theologians in the West who were writing between the 12th to the 16th century. They include St Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther.

The early encounter generated a sophisticated if limited engagement with each other's texts. Christians had to address two Islamic convictions: “the impossibility of God having a Son, and the illogicality of the divine changing when it became human in the act of uniting”. This period generated Muslim claims that the Gospels had been corrupted, abrogated by Islamic scriptures, and thus superseded — claims that continue to be made to justify non-engagement.

In her “Reflections on Mary”, Siddiqui considers that the mother of Jesus will become an opportunity for fruitful interreligious conversation only if Muslims can move beyond debates about “gender, virtue

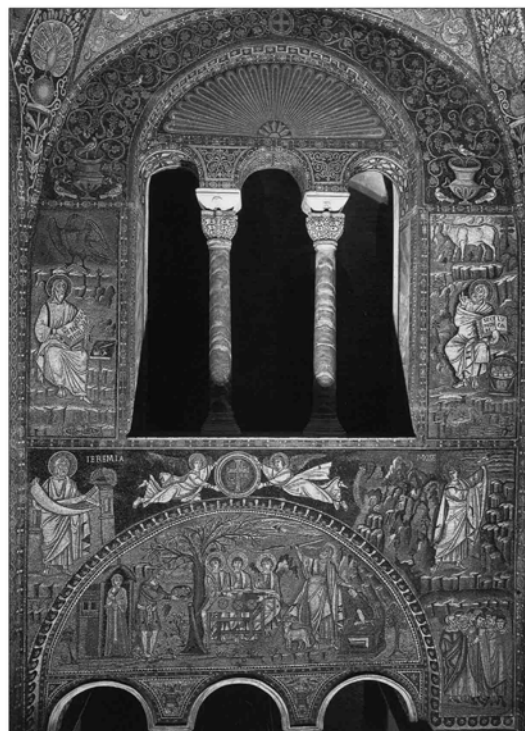
and female piety. This has already happened among some Christian theologians who have wished to promote Mary as an image of liberation of women from poverty and injustice.”

The penultimate chapter, “Monotheism and the Dialectics of Law and Love”, explores, *inter alia*, the distinct anthropologies with which Muslim and Christian thinkers operate. For Christians, prophetic example and Qur'anic guidance are not enough to redeem sinful nature. “From the Muslim perspective, guidance and grace work together not to transform our sinful nature but to lead us to God.”

The book concludes with some moving “Reflections on the Cross”. Professor Siddiqui remarks that, through conversations with Christian colleagues and her reading of Christian theology, “I have learnt in greater depth how to talk of God.” At the same time, she acknowledges that “the structural differences between Islam and Christianity through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ are so great that one could be forgiven for wondering what do Islam and Christianity have in common? Even God seems so different.”

This splendid work makes clear that mutual understanding requires empathy and courage to move beyond formulaic positions. Any serious theology today has to be interreligious.

Dr Lewis is Inter-Faith Adviser to the Bishop of Bradford, and Hon. Visiting Lecturer in the Peace Studies Department at Bradford University.



## Call for ‘generous orthodoxy’

Martyn Percy looks at a view of Christianity amid other faiths

**Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha and Mohammed Cross the Road? Christian identity in a multi-faith world**  
Brian McLaren  
Hodder & Stoughton £12.99  
(978-1-444-70367-2)  
Church Times Bookshop £11.70

A TUTORIAL question, sometimes set for students at Cambridge in the study of religion paper, was to sketch some of the connections that might link Moses, the Buddha, Mohammed, and Jesus. For one mark, you could say they are all great religious leaders. For a few more marks, one might be able to draw some parallels in their teachings. And for one or two more marks, one could perhaps compare and contrast their active ministries as adults.

But there is also something stranger that connects them. They are all adopted. Moses was abandoned by his birth mother and left to float in a small coracle in the River Nile, and was picked up by the daughter of one of the Pharaohs, and nurtured as one of her own. Mohammed was orphaned at the age of six, or perhaps earlier, and was brought up by his uncle in the ancient city of Makka. The Buddha's mother died when he was less than a week old, and he was raised by her sister. Jesus, of course, according to Christian orthodoxy, is not exactly the child of Joseph. Although Mary is clearly his mother, Joseph is not his biological father.

When most people think about adoption, it is a habit of the heart to

believe that it is the child who has somehow been rescued, and that the adopted parents are the redeemers. One of the more extraordinary things about the world's great religions, however, is that this equation is turned around — as most things are in religion — so that the adopted child becomes the redeemer, or the gift.

This is particularly true in Christian thinking, where orthodoxy teaches a kind of double adoption: in return for our adoption of Jesus, we are ourselves adopted into the life of God. Moreover, the adoption is what we might term a “cross-border risk”. Here, Mary and Joseph both take a risk: “Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I have not known a man?’” (Luke 1.34). But, in Mary's acceptance of something alien, rejection is avoided, and hospitality and love are shown instead. Hospitality, love, and redemption are, in turn, bestowed on humanity through God in Christ.

In this accessible and thought-provoking book, Brian McLaren sets out his stall on the foundations that he has already laid with his appeal for “generous orthodoxy”. The term itself has become synonymous with forging a new rallying point for Christians who have moved between the tribal proclivities that shaped their earlier spiritual identity.

McLaren appeals strongly to post-Evangelicals, liberal Catholic Anglicans, and other emerging groups — any, in fact, that want to remain orthodox, and yet also seek to remain open and generous in their ecclesiology and theology to what God has done and is doing outside their immediate tradition. The key issue, then, with a book on interfaith relations, is how the generosity and reciprocity can be practised, Christian identity yet remaining strong.

McLaren has a sure, deft touch in his writing. He draws on the work

of Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (2011), which despite its enormous appeal remains controversial for Evangelicals. McLaren, espousing a consistent and generous orthodoxy, argues that Christians have nothing to fear from engaging with other faiths, but much to gain and learn. His stories, reflections, vignettes, and case-studies build a persuasive case — and, to that extent, this would be an excellent book to give to those thinking through interfaith issues.

The book ends with a touching and eloquent crystallisation of Gandhi's advice to those Christian missionaries who sought to convert him from Hinduism. First, live more like Jesus. Second, don't try and tone your faith down. Third, remember that we are all united by love. Fourth and finally, treat those who don't believe as you do with real generosity.

As I suspect McLaren knows, Christian living like this — in the midst of all the challenges presented by our multifaith culture — can lead us only to a rich and generous orthodoxy.

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RICHARD SHUMACK's *Witnessing to Western Muslims: A world-view approach to sharing faith* is a short guide to evangelising. Shumack has worked among Muslims for more than 12 years; so his method has evolved from his direct experience. The book looks at how Western Muslims view the world, what they believe, and how Christians can show by example and word the power of their faith so that others might also come to believe (The Latimer Trust, £4.50 (£4.05); 978-1-906327-002).