

St Mary's Church, Marylebone, London hosts the Friends of St Marylebone Annual Lecture, which Chris Hewer was invited to deliver in November 2006. The parish is home to the Islamic Cultural Centre and the West London Synagogue as well as important Methodist and Catholic churches, therefore the theme for the lecture was set to explore the multi-faith nature of contemporary Britain, the prophetic role of religions in a liberal democracy and the contribution that Christianity and Islam could make to discussions about the values that should underpin Britain in the 21st century. The following essay was written and circulated amongst those who attended to take further the contents of the lecture.

Christians and Muslims towards the future

Introduction

London stands at the threshold of one of the most exciting periods in its long and varied history. Due to the pattern of migration to this country and the conversion to Islam of Europeans, estimated at 25-40,000 in the UK, London must now be regarded as the third most diverse city in the world in terms of its Muslim population, after only Makka and Madina. This brings an enormous richness to our common life and also allows us to consider what God might be doing by bringing us here. The parish of Marylebone stands uniquely poised to contribute to this discussion. Within its area, we have major churches of Anglican, Methodist and Catholic traditions, the Islamic Cultural Centre (Regent's Park Mosque) and the West London Synagogue. What better place to seek a glimpse of a future vision?

We proceed in four parts: first to set the scene of Christians and Muslims living side by side in Britain and beyond, second to look at what it means to be two faith communities under God, third to explore the role of Christians and Muslims in a liberal democracy, and fourth to look at the impact of international and local challenges. In the conclusion, some practical steps forward are discussed.

Setting the scene

Christians and Muslims have been living in a relationship with one another ever since the time of the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century CE. According to tradition, it was Bahira, a Christian hermit living in the Syrian desert, who first recognised the sign of prophethood upon the young Muhammad. During the first years after Muhammad began to receive the revelation of the Qur'an, the young Muslim community in Makka was persecuted to such an extent that the Prophet sent a portion of them to seek refuge so that the message would not be lost. He sent them to the Christian King of Abyssinia in the knowledge that they would receive a welcome as believers in God and cousins in faith. The Qur'an indeed

speaks of Christians as “the closest in affection” to the Muslims as there are amongst them people of piety, wisdom and humility.

Three elements of Islam indicate this closeness with Christians and Jews. Sunni Muslim men are permitted to take Christian and Jewish women as wives and therefore mothers of their children; such women are at liberty to continue in their own worship and practice within the Muslim household of their husband’s family. Food which has been slaughtered in the traditional way by Jews and Christians is *halal* for Muslims, and this includes the invocation of God before the animal is killed, therefore there is no suggestion that any other name has been invoked, thus Christians and Jews are confirmed in their worship of God. When in 631 a delegation of Christians from the city of Najran, led by their religious and political leaders, came to visit the Prophet in Madina, he permitted them to offer their Christian prayers in his own mosque. Both Qur’an and the *sunna* (customary practice) of the Prophet then, speak of the depth of this “special relationship”.

Christians and Jews lived alongside Muslims in the various Islamic Empires down through the centuries. Their status as the *dhimmi* or “protected peoples” was established on the basis of Qur’an and *sunna*. They were to enjoy freedom to worship in private but not in public places and to pass on their faith to their children but not to seek converts. Their religious buildings and leaders were to be protected provided that they did not become the locus of insurrection against the state. The Muslim army was to protect them alongside the Muslims but they were not permitted to become soldiers and instead paid a military tax (*jizya*). They were engaged at the highest levels of government administration but could not form part of the executive. This can be seen as a form of institutionalised second-class status within the Islamic Empire but historians will testify that Christians and Jews fared much better under Muslim rule than Jews or Muslims under Christian rule in Europe.

Christian communities have survived in the Arab lands right up to the present moment and the relationship between the two communities has been generally good with some bleak patches. One of the tragedies of recent decades is that the historic symbiosis between the two communities has been breached in response to western involvement, whether in the creation of the State of Israel, various imperial and military forays, or the dominance of western business and economic activity. More attention is being focused on the potential for Spain under Muslim rule in the Middle Ages to provide some ideas on the development of new ways in Europe in the future. During the decades of European Christian mission in Africa, there were numerous examples of families in which both religions were practised in a context of mutual celebration.

In the post-European imperial and post-Ottoman period of the 20th century, the picture from many places around the world has not been so good. There have been tensions between Christians and Muslims in the Sudan, Nigeria, Lebanon and Pakistan amongst other countries. Often both sides have failed to live according to the high ideals of their faiths and economic, political and territorial struggles have taken the guise of inter-faith conflict. The tragedy of European inertia in the Bosnian crisis and the rise of national and international terrorism with a putative cloak of Islamic terminology are two poignant examples.

Britain had some contacts with the Muslim world from the time of 8th century traders onwards but Muslims in Britain seem to date from the 17th century. Sometimes these were returned prisoners, who had become Muslims in captivity, diplomats, the descendants of families who had served in the Empire or sons of leading Imperial families who came to Britain for study or commerce, and those English people who had converted to Islam in the course of the Grand Tour, often by realising themselves on the mystical, sufi path. It was precisely such upper class Englishmen in the 19th and early 20th centuries who were responsible for founding the first English Muslim communities (Liverpool 1887), for translating the Qur'an into English (Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall d.1936), for establishing the first mosque (Woking 1889) and the Trusts (1910 and 1928 respectively) that led later to the East London Mosque and the Islamic Cultural Centre.

The last half of the 20th century saw a period of mass migration to Britain under the provisions of the 1948 Nationality Act, whereby former Imperial citizens had free right of entry and the right to register for British citizenship when they settled here permanently. This was still a post-colonial age in which male manual workers were recruited to help "rebuild the motherland" after the war and to fuel the industrial expansion of the 50s and 60s. Many who came were village Muslims who were migrant workers until the 1962 Immigration Act sharpened the issue and turned them into permanent immigrants with families; this led to the social change of many British towns and cities, where there were now settled immigrant communities. Further periods of immigration followed the expulsion of Asians from East Africa during the years of Africanisation (Kenya 1968, Uganda 1971) and also after the civil war for the independence of Bangladesh (1971 formerly East Pakistan). With the rise in the price of oil (1973) many Arabs bought property in London, and with the fall of the Shah in Iran (1979) a wave of Iranian refugees arrived. To our credit, Britain generally accepted a positive responsibility towards refugees from areas of conflict around the world, although not as positive as some mainland European countries. This saw numbers of Muslims arrive in Britain from Albania, Bosnia, Cyprus, Iran, Iraq, Kosovo, Lebanon, Palestine, Somalia, Sudan and Turkey amongst others. The British Foreign Office generally had an accommodating attitude to dissidents from around

the Muslim world who were permitted to settle in Britain as long as their campaigns were directed outside the UK.

And so to Britain at the start of the 21st century with all its richness, diversity and uncertainty about the future. Two things are certain: the path to a new future has irresistibly begun and the Muslim population of Britain will expand. Even those who regret the path that Britain has taken cannot deny that we are now into the third generation of British citizens born of immigrant families and so the question is no longer one of “accommodating immigrants” but rather of building a society in which all British citizens can live and prosper in a spirit of mutual respect. The demographics extrapolated from the 2001 Census would indicate that 52% of all Muslims in Britain were then under 25 years of age, compared to 31% in the population as a whole, and only 6% were then aged over 60, compared to 21%. Such an age profile is bound to lead to a significant expansion in the British Muslim population through citizens exercising their human right to marry and establish a family. It is against this context that we need to explore elements of Christian-Muslim relations.

Beyond social cohesion: two faith communities under God

Christians and Muslims are first and foremost people of faith who must seek the good pleasure of God before all else. What then might be the theological and spiritual dimensions of Christian-Muslim relations in our shared space in Britain?

Islam is clear that Christians and Jews worship the one and only God, who alone is worthy of worship, even if some of their doctrines and practices appear to be confused or wayward, and even though the Qur’an makes clear that they should be invited to embrace Islam as the last and universal “straight path” to worship God in this life and enter Paradise in the next. There are some Christians who have called into question whether Muslims worship God or something other than God as known through the biblical tradition. This is a crucial question that needs to be addressed.

Having lived, studied, worked and campaigned alongside Muslims for the past twenty years, my conviction that both communities worship God is based on a knowledge of the heart that transcends rational argument; I can as much deny the Spirit of God at work in the life of my Muslim sister or brother as I can in my own life or that of fellow Christians, however badly we live out our response to the divine call. I would point to four indicators to support this intuitive knowledge. First the majority of Christians would accept that Jews worship God, even though by definition the Jewish conception of God differs on fundamental issues from that of Christians, and yet God appears to be “big enough” to accept the worship and service of both communities, therefore there is the potential for this to be extended

to include Islam. Second there are substantial areas of overlap between the Qur'anic view of God and that of Christians, notwithstanding the fundamental areas of disagreement. Third there remain some 14 million Arab Christians in the world who have lived alongside Muslims through good times and bad, both in the service of Allah, as God is known in Arabic to both communities. Fourth it is common to find converts between the two faiths, in both directions, who will bear testimony that they used to worship God before their conversion and still worship God now, even though they now understand the God that they worship differently. These indicators support me in my intuitive knowledge that Christians and Muslims are two faith communities under the one and only God.

Once this principle is accepted, then I suggest that certain consequences follow. We need to remember that God is God and as such God is ultimately unknowable. We are all servants of God and it is not for the servant to tell the Master how things should be. We do not create God to fit our own preconceptions! If it pleases God that different faith communities should conceive of and worship God in different ways, then so be it. God remains God and I must live with that which I do not yet understand. If we believe that God is active in human affairs and continues to call and guide humanity, then we need to ask what might be the intention of God in drawing Christians and Muslims to live together in Britain today. Neither faith community has been in this situation before, in which we live side by side in a secular liberal democratic society in which neither faith controls the levers of power. What might Christians and Muslims have to learn from and to teach one another, and what might we both have to contribute jointly and severally to the common good of this society? For me, this reality must be lived in the immanent awareness of our human accountability before God; how will I answer questions about my relationship with Muslim neighbours on the awesome Day of Judgement? There are many "what if?" questions that might be explored in this context. What if Christians in the early decades of Muslim migration to this country had recognised another faith community under God and offered them the hospitality of their abundant buildings for worship and community activity, much as the Prophet offered the hospitality of his mosque to the delegation from Najran? There are striking examples in London and beyond, in which such hospitality was offered and the positive impact on local relations can be noted to this day.

A whole range of theological questions are raised in the current context, some of which have been present in earlier centuries but some arise for the first time now. One definition of theology would be the attempt to explain with precision and clarity my faith in the thought pattern and concepts of another. The present situation then gives an abundant opening for the scholars of both faiths to "do theology" in a fresh context, in fidelity to our respective revelations and traditions, and yet in a language, philosophical system and context that is "ever new". How then can Christian theologians, for example, make a place for Islam within their

theology of God's dealings with humanity? How might Muslim scholars, working both through intellection and intuition, describe and come to terms with a community that still follows an earlier revelation even after the coming of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad; could such life and worship, even though based on a "less clearly defined pathway" still be pleasing to God and lead to Paradise? It is axiomatic that Christians do not and cannot accept the Qur'an and prophethood of Muhammad in the same way in which Muslims do, but what can the modern Christian theologian say of these two pivotal elements in the faith of Islam? Christians and Muslims have key individuals in common; how might Muslims and Christians exploring together their different understandings of Jesus, for example, draw out clarity and new insights into the mysteries of God? In the light of 20th century Christian theology, how might the challenges made by the Qur'an and Muslims to key concepts in Christian faith and theology, such as the meaning of the title "Son of God", the doctrine of the Trinity or salvation through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, provide fecund ground for joint theological exploration? What if Muslim scholars come to the conclusion that what Christians are striving to say is not in every respect so discordant to Islam after all?

As two faith communities sitting before God, might Muslims and Christians not explore what God has been saying to both through their respective scriptures? This would of course lead on to theological reflection on how those texts have been and are currently interpreted but it ought also to provoke a spiritual sharing of the power and message of God in one another's life and what it means thus to explore being on a life journey based on divine guidance. Another area of spiritual interaction is in the arena of prayer. Whilst both faiths will want to defend the exclusivity of public initiate acts, such as lining up for *salat* and receiving communion at the eucharist, informal prayer to God is surely another thing. May I not add my *amen* as a Christian to my Muslim sister's prayer in praise or thanksgiving to God, in seeking forgiveness or in intercession for the needs of the world?

As Christians and Muslims sharing society together, it is highly likely that we will see an increase in the number of two-faith marriages, in which both partners seek to be faithful to the following and worship of God in their respective traditions. This must surely be the most intimate of inter-faith relations. Such marriages raise a whole host of legal, theological and spiritual questions, and will need much pastoral support and guidance from both communities. Neither Islam nor Christianity can say that admission to their respective communities is closed; both faiths seek new members. In a liberal democracy like Britain, might there be a discussion around "good practice" in seeking to share the faith and inviting new members? How does one do justice to the desire to share what is in one's heart

and at the same time leave the other person free freely to exercise their own right of response to what they feel God is doing in their life?

It is not just “unbelievers” who are called to embrace one of our two faiths, there must always be room for conversion from Christianity to Islam and vice versa; this is a “two-way street”. Our concern here must be not only the freedom of conscience of the individual but also the way in which that act has implications for both communities. How do we support believing parents who see a daughter or son convert to the other faith and thus leave the way which is so dear and central in their lives? The whole issue of “freedom of conscience” needs more work in our context. European Christianity is a fairly late convert to the concept and it must be clear that Christians will never accept the conventional *dhimmi* status in the context of a democratic system. What might such issues in the context of a modern secular liberal democracy call forth from both traditions?

Christians and Muslims in Britain share many concerns when they look towards the future. How do we hand on our respective faith-based way of life to our children who are often caught between cultures, uncertain “standards”, peer pressures, and varying levels of educational achievement and thus a stake in the future? How do we cherish and guide our young adults into an informed and thought-through faith that will be the foundation for an ever-changing adult life and will withstand the passing temptations that come along? How might we articulate and share our values across generations as they relate to justice, economic standards, social engagement, altruism, and coping pragmatically when necessary with good outcomes in the absence of the optimum? There has been much talk, quite rightly, about the need to bring on a generation of Muslim religious leaders who are well-educated, spiritually mature and able to communicate and inspire the younger generation of Muslims onto the Straight Path of Islam, but Christians might reflect on their “missing generations” and join Muslims in the quest for appropriate strategies in terms of education, training and pastoral equipment for the future, e.g. how can any Christian or Muslim religious leader be equipped for the job without a knowledge of the other faith(s) and having had the opportunity to reflect on some of these issues? It is in the nature of most Muslims and some groups of Christians that there is no hierarchical structure that can be said to “represent” the voice of the faith community, and yet we live in a situation in which there are many voices, both within the commonly accepted bounds of diversity and outside it. How might we work alongside one another to help people recognise genuine spiritual leadership, respect legitimate difference of opinion and oppose the siren voices leading to destruction?

Religion in a liberal democracy: the radical challenge to society

What is the function of religion in a liberal democracy in which laws are made, customary practices are established and a sense of the common good is developed not according to a set of values derived from any one religious or ideological tradition but rather from a process of consultation with the citizens in a climate of open discussion and various viewpoints? Given that Christianity and Islam have centuries of working with an initial revelation concerned with what it is to be human and live in a human society, what have they to offer to the debates on many aspects of life in contemporary Britain? In short, what earthly use are they to draw people toward that which benefits individuals and society even if people do not accept or embrace their essential stance in faith?

Many Christians pray daily that the will of God may be done on earth as it is in heaven; that the Kingdom of God may come about on earth. Some will see themselves as instrumental in making this happen, through the power of God at work in them, and others as “waiting on God” until God chooses to bring it about. Again many Christians will know and use the Gospel canticle, the *Magnificat*, in which God is praised as the one who pulls down the mighty from their thrones and raises the lowly, who fills the starving with good things and sends the rich away empty. Muslims must be engaged in the constant struggle to submit all to the will of God (*jihad*) and to shape the whole of human life: individual, family, community and society, according to the will of the Creator. Evil must be resisted and cannot be allowed to oppress and tyrannise human beings on earth. As the Qur’an commands, justice must be done even if it goes against oneself.

Even in this brief space, it must be clear that both faiths have much to share in a liberal democracy in terms of asking the big questions about a vision for what it is to be human and to shape a human society. My answer would be that religion in a liberal democracy has the duty of holding up a mirror to society and asking “is this really how you think that human life should be lived?”, in this way the religions have the responsibility to raise a voice of social prophecy constructively to criticise values, policies and realities in the light of the message that they carry into the world. In this way they share what they have accumulated in their “treasuries of wisdom” over the centuries for the benefit of all.

A survey of some of the issues that Islam and Christianity might be able to develop in a social prophetic way in our society would include:

- A challenge to modern-day idolatries. What has been allowed in our society to take the place of God as the sole object of worship or to come between us and the worship of God: power, race, economic might, nationalism, human greed, class etc.?

- How to work towards a just social order based on values such as human equality, seeking the good of all, compassion for the weak, bearing the burdens of others, and sharing globally for the common good of humanity.
- How to build an ethical economic system in which my gain is not based on the exploitation of others.
- What can we contribute to the debate over a work-life balance and how can we structurally arrange things so that individuals and couples do not have to work ever longer hours with the impact that that has on family life?
- What do we have to contribute to the debate on the family, given that contemporary families come in a variety of forms and that society contains also single people, couples without children and same-sex partnerships?
- There is an on-going debate over the rights of society, parents and children in the care and development of children. If children are “all our futures”, then how might that be reflected in terms of education, child support, and the funding of child-rearing within society?
- With an ever-ageing population, what do our faiths have to contribute to the place of elders in society, their support and respect, and their duties to others?
- How are Muslim and Christian women using their faith traditions as tools for liberation within society and challenging the expectations of those who would seek to exploit them in a wide variety of ways?
- What do we have to share in the debate over the future shape of British social life? How do we respect the desire of those who wish to live in communities, whilst acknowledging and opposing the destructive capacity of circumstances that force people to live in particular areas and thus segregate them from other groups within society?
- Politics and political parties are the tools for organising collective life in contemporary Britain. Muslims and Christians are to be found in all mainstream political parties where they have to struggle and compromise in the process of shaping an agenda that will win an election mandate.

Any society is likely to be involved in discussion and seeing consensus about the long-term issues that affect us all.

- Both faiths are deeply committed to the field of education but surely for something more than just catechises of the next generation. There must be more to education than an endless round of league tables and examination results: What do Islam and Christianity have to say about what it is to be a fully-rounded educated human being and then how do we educate someone in that direction?
- Questions of health and therefore dealing with its absence cannot be divorced from a context in which we ask what it is to be truly healthy and to have an integrated spiritual, psychological and physical well-being. What might the two faiths have to share in this debate?

- Christianity and Islam have much to say about the relationship of human beings to the rest of the ecological system; how might this be shared in an age of concern for global warming, pollution, renewable resources and world crises caused by economic exploitation, profligate consumption and an expanding population?
- In the great ethical debates of modern living, what might we have to contribute to the discussion on medical ethics, the eradication of poverty, the ethics of war and armaments, the right to affordable housing, the resolution of conflict, the ethics of international development and relief, and ethics in economics and investment.

The impact of international and local challenges

Images flash around the world via the Internet and satellite TV channels. Many see these images without understanding the commentary that accompanies them and so the images are even more distorted. By its nature, the Internet cannot be policed and so there is always a potential for ideologies to be transmitted across borders where they can sometimes find receptive eyes and ears. In many ways, the genius of an idea that comes of age is that it is quickly divorced from those who invented or first implemented it. Once the atomic bomb was invented and had been used, it could not be uninvented and its existence, whether actual or potential, is with us irrespective of the scientists who first called it into being. Such is the nature of an ideology and it is not susceptible to a “war against terrorism”.

The real battle against extremism in the guise of Islam is to be won by removing its causes and undercutting its twisted ideology. It is “our problem” and not something for Muslims to tackle alone. The first step must be to make common cause to name an extreme position or a distortion for what they are and not allow the rhetoric that “this is Islam”. Given that some of this comes from the “Christian extreme right” it is obviously a task in which Christians and Muslims can and must combine in the search for a just resolution. The causes that drive people to adopt such extreme positions can be economic, political, social, historical, theological and ideological. It must surely be obvious that until there is a just solution to the Palestinian question, the future of Kashmir, economic imbalance and manipulation, political and economic corruption in Muslim-majority and other lands, and a realignment in American and British foreign policy, then there will be no end to the drift to extremism.

Similarly the inter-related social, economic, educational and employment problems that beset many young Muslims in Britain, combined with the lack of high-class religious leadership and thus of sound teaching, and a low self-esteem and sense of direction, lead to a fertile seed-bed for distorted ideas. We need a

multi-pronged approach to root out the causes of the extremism that has affected a tiny minority of Muslims worldwide. Those who would not embrace extreme action are nevertheless conscious of the causes but seek to address them through political action and campaigning. They can become willing partners with Christians and all people of good will in an international and national campaign for social justice.

Many elements within the media have become actors in the field of international and Muslim affairs rather than just reporters. If “we get the media that we deserve” then surely we must be involved in monitoring, analysing, criticising, supporting and withdrawing our support from institutions as appropriate.

Conclusion

One of the horrifying aspects of modern warfare, like terrorist acts, is that it is indiscriminate. We are all in this together! It is a principle that underpins my work as a Christian committed to helping people better to understand Islam and Christian-Muslim relations that “we Christians” will get the kind of Islam and Muslims in Britain in the future in which we invest today (the same is also true of Christianity and Christians, I hasten to add!). If we allow half-truths and falsehoods to be peddled in the name of Islam then our children will reap the consequences. We need to get ourselves equipped to work with and alongside Muslim friends in a common campaign. That is the basis for my current work in running Understanding Islam courses, study days and talks.

Important work is being done by Christian specialist organisations, e.g. the St Philip’s Centre in Leicester, which runs joint programmes with the Islamic Foundation to train Muslim sector chaplains in the fields of education, health and prison work. New ways of reading and discussing sacred texts are being developed through Scriptural Reasoning groups. Hundreds of local projects run at parish and community level to build bridges of understanding and establish practical projects. On a strategic level, the National Christian-Muslim Forum was established in January 2006 and its contribution to the area is eagerly awaited. Britain can be seen as a laboratory in which new ideas are developed, tested and refined; in this way they can be exported to be applied *mutatis mutandis* in other countries as appropriate. We in Britain and indeed London have a pivotal role to play in this. And so, back to Marylebone; divine fortune has played a hand in bringing into close proximity Christian, Jewish and Muslim institutions of vision and energy. Let us look to the day when there will be a new series of Jewish-Christian-Muslim Marylebone Lectures to act as a think tank for developing discussion and ideas in this field in London.