Teaching the Faith of Another: Reflections arising from Britain

This article is drawn from a paper presented at a conference in March 2016 in Lahore, Pakistan, on "Contemporary Issues in Religious Education"; therefore, it draws most of its examples from a Muslim-Christian context.

Britain, like other countries in Western Europe, has changed significantly over the last sixty years in terms of its faith communities' make-up. The situation is particularly diverse in Britain due to its colonial legacy. Whilst in other European countries the minority faith community is overwhelmingly Muslim, Britain has significant communities of all major faiths and representatives of many minor and indeed obscure ones. Along with this faith diversity, there is also a great range of linguistic and ethnic groups. The Muslim population of London is reckoned as the third most diverse in any city in the world, after only Makka and Madina. Muslims currently make up five per cent of the total population of the UK. The Muslim population increased by seventy per cent between the census of 2001 and 2011, and the markedly young age-profile would suggest that a similar increase will be seen in the next census in 2021. Within the Muslim community itself, I cannot think of any theological or legal grouping that is not represented. The overwhelming majority of British Muslims are holders of British nationality and therefore they have the full rights of a citizen, which is important when it comes to school-based religious education.

Religious Education in schools

Such religious diversity in Britain developed in the 1960s and so by the 1970s questions were being asked about the contents of the Religious Education (RE) curriculum in schools. From the foundational Education Act of 1944, RE has been a compulsory subject for all pupils throughout their school life. This was part of a deal struck between the churches, who owned many of the older community school buildings, but could not afford the running costs, and the state, which had the money for running costs, but could not afford to build new schools to replace all the existing church schools. The initial assumption was that all such RE in schools should be Christian. Given the diversity amongst British Christians, this tended to mean a safe diet of bible study, thus avoiding the doctrinal differences between different churches. Parents had the right in law to withdraw their children from RE without giving a reason. This right was sometimes exercised by Jews and people from minority Christian groups; occasionally also by people who held no religious belief.

By 1975, in Birmingham, one of Britain's most diverse cities, a new RE syllabus was introduced that required pupils to study two or three religions from a given list of six. This began a trend that was taken up in various ways across the country. The latest move in this direction came into force in September 2016, from which time the syllabus requires the study of two faiths for public examinations at 16+ (GCSE) for pupils who choose to take that subject to examination level. Schools and pupils can choose whichever two faiths they wish and the split can either be 50/50 or 75/25,

depending on the permutations permitted by examination boards. For those who do not choose to take RE to examination level, some element of RE will still be compulsory for all students.

The shift from 'Christian education for Christian students' in 1944 to the present multi-faith RE required a considerable re-thinking of the educational philosophy to be applied. It was not the job of such 'state schools' to nurture children in their own faith; this was held to be the task of the families and religious communities, who were free to establish 'faith-based schools' of their own with state-funding if they wished. The task of the mainstream state schools can best be articulated as 'learning about and learning from different faiths'.

In the first element, 'learning about', it was argued that no citizen of modern Britain could consider themselves to be 'educated' without a knowledge and understanding of the principal faiths that shape the lives of billions of people on earth. Even if they followed no religious way of life or belonged to another faith community, the people with whom they would share their lives, in neighbourhoods, through work and social engagement, and just by watching the news on television, would come from a range of faiths. The 1975 Birmingham Agreed Syllabus, with considerable foresight, recognised the way in which many people in post-Christian Britain and Europe are following non-religious stances in living their lives. These too needed to be included in any study in modern society. To be able to live alongside others and build a society and world based on justice and peace requires an understanding of what motivates and shapes the lives of others. We might well ask, in our globalised world, if this element of being educated about other faiths and non-religious stances for living should not be regarded as a basic requirement for twenty-first century human living.

In the second element, 'learning from', it was argued that all human beings, by virtue of being human and not on account of any religious persuasion, would be faced with 'ultimate questions of human existence': the world is unfair, the wrong-doers sometimes prosper, suffering comes to the innocent, some people struggle with great energy for the benefit of others, desires are not fulfilled, human beings inflict evil on others, and so on. The religions and philosophies of the world have centuries of experience and accumulated wisdom in helping people to work though such questions and the way that they speak about them can be a source of new understanding for others, including those who do not share their particular beliefs. Thus we can all 'learn from' other human beings and the teachings that help them to deal with such 'ultimate questions'.

Few of us would argue that education finishes on the day that we leave school. This conviction has developed into an interest in 'life-long learning', by which is meant access to education throughout our human lives, whether in formal settings: college, university or in-service professional education, or in informal settings: education for interest and expansion of human understanding. This last category, when applied to

all adults without distinction as regards academic background or intellectual standard would be summed up in the phrase 'adult popular education'.

A 'Religious Studies' approach

It is an exceptional person who has a developed understanding of several religions at the depth required to be able to teach them well. Similarly, few teachers are prepared by their university studies to teach several faiths. Many teachers have to build on the basis of a single-faith education and expand from there to understand other faiths. Alongside this situation, the discipline of Religious Studies has developed in western universities to study religions in a secular non-confessional way. Such Religious Studies' scholars devised a way of analysing different faiths. Every faith, it was held, could be analysed in terms of: Founders or Messengers, Holy Books, Worship or Rituals, Holy Places and Pilgrimage, Festivals, Rites of Passage and Ethical Ways of Life.

A problem with this approach is that one all too easily compares elements that are not really comparable. Who is the *founder* of Islam: God, Adam or Muhammad? Is Muhammad *as messenger* comparable with Guru Nanak *as messenger*? Is a Muslim understanding of the Qur'an comparable with a Christian understanding of the Bible? Does the Bible fulfil the same function within Christianity as the Qur'an does within Islam? Is a Christian understanding of Jesus comparable with a Muslim understanding of Muhammad? Could a Muslim ever say that Muhammad is the Word of God incarnate or a Christian say that the Gospels/New Testament were sent down upon the heart of Jesus as a literal, verbal revelation of the Word of God? God's great gift of salvation for Muslims is the sending down of the Qur'an as the last, universal and protected deposit of the Word of God, whereas God's great saving act for Christians is the incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus. Such attempts at analytical similarities can quickly lead to distortions: Islam all too easily becomes 'Muhammadanism'.

Within whose conceptual framework?

What happens if we have been educated within one faith tradition and thus form a conceptual framework of religion based on that model? Let us take just Christianity and Islam by way of example. I make these two examples as stark and sharp as I can to make a point! Not every Muslim or Christian thinks this way!

If I am a Muslim educated in Islamic studies, then I know that throughout history, from the time of Prophet Adam onwards, God has sent Prophets to the earth to convey essentially the same message to humankind about how human life should be lived according to God's revealed ethical will. There is a Hadith that speaks of 124,000 of such Prophets. This guidance was contained in scriptures, of which hundreds (at least) must have been sent to the earth over the millennia as "No people have been left without guidance" [Q. 16:36]. The Qur'an itself contains the names of twenty-five of

these Prophets and mentions scriptures that were sent to five of them. This process, repeated an unknown number of times but culminating in the sending down of the Qur'an to Prophet Muhammad, forms the Islamic conceptual framework for the understanding of all 'heavenly religions'. Given that the Qur'an names Jesus as a Prophet of God upon whom was sent down the *Injil*, it is clear that authentic Christianity as taught by the Prophet Jesus ought to work within this Islamic conceptual framework too. In this way, I have a presumption of the way in which I should teach about Christianity; if Christians regard it as a distortion of their faith, then that is an indication of how far they have strayed from the true Christianity as taught by Jesus.

If I am a Christian educated in Christian theology, I know that the books of the Bible are the work of many hands and that books that bear the name of a particular author cannot necessarily be traced to that person, at least in their entirety. I am used to looking around for influences upon the authors and editors of scriptures to see how they might have affected the text as we have it. I know that some books of the Bible were written centuries after the events of which they speak and that there is a certain backward-projection of events, ideas and personalities. I have a conception of history that means that it is always written from a particular perspective and is never 'neutral reporting'; similarly I know that anything that claims to be 'historical evidence' must be subjected to intense sceptical scrutiny before it can be accepted. In this way, I have a presumption of the way in which I should teach about Islam, to subject the Qur'an to the tools of literary criticism and the *sira* and Hadith to intense historical scrutiny; this is bound to lead me to conclusions that Muslim scholars and believers cannot recognise as their faith and thus must reject.

This way of teaching about the faith of the other, which has been and still is common in both communities, does not lead to the quality of understanding for which I work or which I find to be productive leading towards the kind of society that I wish to help bring to birth. How can we find a way to teach about the faith of the other without distortion while still remaining true to our own consciences?

A suspension of judgement?

At the end of the day, a Christian cannot believe that the Qur'an is the last, definitive, preserved-by-God revelation sent down from God in a direct, literal, verbal way and remain a Christian, because the Qur'an says things that cannot be reconciled with essential elements of Christian belief. We have disparities of fact, e.g., whether or not Jesus was crucified to death and resurrected to eternal life, as well as differences of theological expression and belief, e.g., whether Trinitarian monotheism is really monotheism at all or some kind of confusion of the essence of oneness. This really is not a judgement that I can suspend because these are essential elements of my Christian faith, but must they form the lens through which I understand and teach about Islam?

In a similar way, the Qur'an is quite explicit that Jesus is one of those most exalted human beings, chosen by God to be a Prophet, to receive the *Injil*, to live it out in practice and establish a way of life amongst his immediate followers that was true to the message. A Muslim cannot believe that the Qur'an 'got it wrong' about Jesus not being crucified to death and raised to eternal life: rather Muslims must believe that the Qur'an was right when it said that "it only appeared to be so; he was taken up from them" [Q. 4:157-158]. Throughout the centuries, Muslim scholarship has not been able to reconcile Christian doctrines of Incarnation or Trinity with the transcendence of God and *tauhid* taught repeatedly by the Qur'an. Again, this is not a judgement that the Muslim can suspend because these are essential aspects of Islamic faith, but must they form the lens through which one understands and teaches about Christianity?

If Christians and Muslims are not to deny central aspects of their faith and cannot suspend judgement on those things that are so clearly and essentially required, then how are we to find ways of teaching the faith of the other without distortion by viewing it only through our own conceptual framework?

One thing above all else

The starting point for our journey of understanding and teaching is the irreducible belief in God, the Majestic, the Creator, the All-powerful, the All-merciful Lover of all that exists, whose essence is beyond our ability to know and adequately speak about and whose infinity lies beyond time and space. Both faiths hold that God is unique, the one and only God, therefore if people are not worshipping God, they are not worshipping another god but rather something other than God. There are Muslims who hold that contemporary Christians are not worshipping God, but something else of their own construction, just as there are Christians who believe that Muslims are not worshipping God, but something else; without this central tenet of belief the path of understanding and teaching is barren, if indeed it exists at all. We are lost in a world of mutual condemnation and polemic.

Once this essential belief in God is accepted in both communities, it changes the framework for our understanding and teaching. God, by definition, is infinite in knowledge, wisdom etc. and cannot be constrained by human knowledge, theology, words or even our scriptures. A Christian believes that the Bible contains all that is necessary for the human being to be saved and brought into an eternal embrace of growing in fellowship with God. Jesus is, in Christian belief, the unique revelation of the Word of God in flesh, but this does not mean that the Word of God is not spoken apart from the man Jesus. A Muslim believes that the Qur'an contains all the guidance from God necessary for a human being to live a life in submission to the divine will in all things. The Qur'an is unique in being the deposit of the Word of God in Arabic preserved by God for all time, but it is not the only occasion on which the Word of God was revealed in human history. Both faiths can surely accept that there is more to God than we can know at this stage of our lives individually and of our human history collectively. Both faiths can accept that their fundamental building blocks of

belief must remain and be affirmed, but without claiming that they represent 'all that is to be known or understood of God throughout all eternity'. There is a profound message of humility and action in the counsel of the Qur'an, "to compete with one another in goodness and on the Day of Judgement God will make clear to you all those things on which you now differ" [Q. 5:48].

This gives us an approach to understanding and teaching the faith of another in which certain things are just 'given' but that is not the end of the discussion. When asked by Muslims why I cannot accept the Qur'an as the Word of God, as they do, and Muhammad as the final Prophet of God, as they do, then the answer is a 'given': If I could accept those two things, then I would be a Muslim, as long as I remain a Christian, I cannot. That does not need to be the end of the conversation. Further questions might be: What can you say of the Qur'an or Muhammad? What is God saying to you as a Christian through the Qur'an? What character traits in Muhammad elevate your soul in drawing closer to God? What has enriched your spiritual life through your encounter with Islam and Muslims? And so the list goes on to encompass every aspect of our relationship with God, other human beings and the whole creation. The same could be said in the other direction of the 'givens' from the Muslim perspective.

This position enables us to have integrity and security in our own faith and yet frees us to have the liberty to develop sufficient understanding of another faith to be able to teach it.

What weight to give to the term 'understanding'?

Educational theory distinguishes between 'knowledge' and 'understanding'. Knowledge is the accumulation of data and the ability to use it in appropriate ways. It tells us 'that something is so', for example, that God in the Qur'an forbids the consumption of the pig. Understanding is generated by applying human reason to knowledge to ask 'why is that so?' and 'what can we learn from that?' for example, accepting the knowledge that God has forbidden the consumption of the pig; why did God do that? What grounds for that ruling might there be to uncover by the use of our rational faculties? Modern education produces people who are trained to ask the 'why' questions and not just to accumulate the knowledge that has been handed down to them.

If we are to seek understanding in engineering, then we might be able to see this as an intellectual activity. We understand how the laws of physics work 'in our heads'. If we are to seek understanding of a religious way of life, this requires something more than just understanding 'in our heads'. Religion is not just an intellectual activity; it requires the commitment of the whole person to follow a certain way of life. This we can think of as understanding 'of the heart', of the core of our being. Therefore to understand a religion requires both understanding in the head and in the heart or we can say both intellective and intuitive understanding. Further, a religious way of life

is, in its deepest dimension, a path of spiritual journeying towards a closer relationship with God; it therefore requires 'spiritual understanding'.

If, when we are teaching a religion, we are only giving knowledge, then we are not engaging the intellectual powers of the students to promote the deeper level of understanding. This religious understanding, as we have seen, must engage intellective, intuitive and spiritual dimensions of the person; we need to understand how the totality of a person is devoted to this religious way of life. This is real 'religious education'. If then we set about educating people in a religion that is not ours or theirs we need to develop and promote this level of total human understanding.

This deeper level of understanding, we can call empathetic, by which we mean enabling the student to make the leap of imagination to put themselves into the position of someone who has surrendered their life totally to following the other religion. This empathetic understanding needs to work on all levels: intellectual, intuitive and spiritual. The Christian who seeks empathetic understanding of Islam must be able to think like a Muslim, feel like a Muslim and sense in the depths of their spirit before God what it must be to be a Muslim.

This is the way, as a Christian helping others to understand Islam, that I evaluate my teaching. It is based on two Islamic principles: the covenant of the pre-embodied souls [Q. 7:172] and the concept of *din al-fitra*. In sura seven of the Qur'an, we find related the encounter of God with all the human souls that would ever exist prior to their embodiment. They are asked by God, "Am I not your Lord?" and respond, "Yes indeed!" We can thus say that in every human being there is a spiritual vacuum waiting to be filled through recognition of the lordship of God and submission to the divine will. Similarly, the concept of *din al-fitra* means that living according to the divine commands and drawing ever-closer to the creator is the natural way of life for every human being. If then someone is presenting the authentic message of Islam effectively to any human being, there should be a resonance in the totality of their being – at least to some extent: it should make sense, it should feel 'right' and there should be a spiritual acknowledgement that this is 'of God'. If this occurs, then authentic teaching has taken place and a real empathetic understanding has been evoked. If this does not occur, then either I have taught badly and failed to communicate or what I have been teaching about is not truly Islamic but perhaps some cultural expression of it. There is, of course, another dimension to the question. Understanding is a two-way process. No matter how authentic, brilliant and communicative the teaching might be, it needs to be received 'empathetically' by the student; this reception can be clouded and indeed thwarted by preconceptions and prejudices on the part of the student. The same construction could be made in reverse to speak about teaching an empathetic understanding of Christianity.

Which comes first, the teacher or the student?

The reality is that all teachers were students before they became teachers, but in this case, the teacher must become again the student to learn to master the new approach. Often, as teachers, we become didactic, working on a closed epistemological system that says: "I have the truth, I teach it, you learn it, now you have the truth". Western methods of education are not confined to 'the West' but permeate many educational systems around the world and, via the internet, they can arrive in places and ways of which the teachers may not know or approve. Our human God-given intellect will always pose questions and seek understanding, either with the support of the teacher or without it. In a situation like Britain, where children are taught from the early years of education to puzzle things out for themselves, put things in their own words, see if there is another way of doing that, take an opinion on the matter in hand, and so on, there is a real crisis in religious education if it does not adopt this questioning mode seeking understanding. Western Christianity failed to present its faith in an intellectually satisfying way in this 'all-questioning context' and the consequences can be seen in the huge drop-off in active Christian discipleship in recent decades. Who can doubt that Islam and other faiths will face the same challenge and potential consequences? Children who are taught to question everything during their school careers are not going to stop as adults. As their experience of life broadens, the depth of questioning increases. We cannot expect modern educated people to switch back to 'accepting all that the teacher says without question' when it comes to religion. We highly regard and remunerate people precisely for not doing that in other academic disciplines like medicine, pharmacy, engineering and so on. The gift of human reason and enquiry is God-given.

The faith of the teacher

What impact does teaching the faith of another have on the commitment of teachers to their own faith? Does it somehow dilute it, or make a *masala* or 'mish-mash' of religions, so that one does not really know any more where one belongs? Does it necessarily lead to a reduction in the specificities of my faith so that we develop new interpretations based on commonalities between faiths but with an assumption that all are fundamentally equal? Anyone who sets out on the journey of studying another faith is bound to reach the stage of seeing their own faith in the mirror of the other. It is highly likely that they will experience the attraction of the other faith in some elements. How can it not be so if we are dealing with God-revealed ways for human beings to draw closer to God? One is bound to ask if the other religion is the same as mine. If it is different, where are the differences? Which of those differences identified are important? Why are they important? Through this process, in my experience, the reflective teacher is likely to come to a deeper understanding of, and conviction to, their own faith, *insha' allah*. In my own case, I can say that, after thirty years of studying Islam and helping people to understand it, I now have a better grasp of what is central to Christianity than after years of studying Christian theology in an exclusively Christian context and am more deeply rooted in my Christian faith than

when I began my journey of discovering Islam. The quest for a deeper relationship with God in this process leads to a more profound sense of humility; who am I to dictate to God how God chooses to communicate with the world? But not with 'the world' in an abstract sense alone: have I the humility to allow God to speak to me as a Christian through the Qur'an, Muhammad, and the Muslims' lived faith, not to convert me to Islam, or to give me a sense that "I was right all along", but rather to deepen, purify, correct and strengthen me in my Christian faith that I may walk more closely the path of a disciple of Christ?