

## Approaching Christian-Muslim Education

Our concern in this essay is to look at elements of Christian-Muslim education as a sub-set of inter-faith education. We will explore this from the perspective of believers in both faiths, looking both at themselves and at one another. In this way the approach is theological rather than sociological and within the context of believers rather than from a 'neutral' stance such as the academic study of religious phenomena. This puts us immediately into the context of being two faith communities before God and thus one central aspect is that we will seek to hear God speaking to us through the faith and practice of the other partner. A central thesis is that when a Christian or Muslim comes to look at the other faith, there is a necessary reflection on one's own faith: How is the other faith the same as mine and how is it different? Are the differences important and if so, how and why? Thus Christian-Muslim education is both a theological and spiritual deepening of my own faith as well as an exploration of the other.

It is central to both faiths that there is one, and only one, God. Therefore we need to explore this central tenet at the outset. Either Christians and Muslims are worshipping the same, one and only God, or else one is worshipping God and the other something other than God; there cannot be two gods in this equation. It is helpful to remember that Christians and Muslims throughout the Middle East have lived side-by-side in the same communities since the time of Muhammad, in countries such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq. They have shared a common belief in the one God and often shared buildings and joint pilgrimage centres, such as those in Syria. Both communities to this day, when speaking Arabic, refer to God as Allah. The terms God, with a capital 'G', and Allah have the same meaning: 'the one and only God'. Neither word can have a plural form.

It is central to Muslim belief that Muhammad was the last in a long chain of prophets, each teaching the oneness of God, who alone is worthy of worship. Thus the prophets Moses, Jesus and Muhammad were united in this belief. The Qur'an makes this clear: "We believe in that which has been sent down to us and has been sent down to you; our God and your God is one and to him do we submit" [Q. 29:46]. Whilst Muslims are required to believe that Prophet Jesus taught the same pure monotheism (*tawhid*) as Prophet Muhammad, there has always been the concern that Christians, with their talk of Trinity, have departed from the original teaching of Jesus and thus created their own figment of a trinitarian god. Christian theologians, of course, will take exception to such an idea and say that their trinitarian theology is precisely to protect the oneness and indivisibility of God. This is an understanding to which we will return.

The first Christian theologian to write systematically about Islam, John of Damascus (d.750), was clear that the Ishmaelites, as he called the Muslims, were worshipping the one and only God. This was a benchmark that was obscured during the centuries of polemic but was re-stated with clarity by the gatherings of Christian bishops and theologians in the twentieth century. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the highest teaching authority of the Catholic Church, made this explicit in its documents

on the church (*Lumen Gentium* §16) and on other religions (*Nostra Aetate* § 3). The same position was taken by the ten-yearly gathering of the bishops of the Anglican Communion, the Lambeth Conference of 1988, which went one step further in declaring that both faiths under God “will correct one another” in their understanding. Although there are some other Christian churches and individuals that have yet to make such an explicit statement, we will take it that, from the perspective of both faiths, it is the same, one and only God who is worshipped. This gives the basis for our Christian-Muslim education; it is a mutual exploration of the relationship of human beings, through both faiths, with the one God.

### **Distinguishing two levels of understanding**

At one level, believers have to make sense of the other tradition within their own paradigm or relational model. Muslims have the benefit of coming after Christianity and having a revealed text that speaks overtly of the People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitab*), which explicitly includes Christians. The Islamic paradigm revolves around the twin foundation stones of Muhammad as the last prophet and the Qur'an as the last, definitive and universal revealed text, protected from error or mishap by God. This sets the model for God's relationship with prophets and scriptures: from this Muslim paradigm, Jesus was a prophet like Muhammad and received a scripture, the *Injil*, in a parallel position to the Qur'an. From this it is clear for Muslims, that if Christians were true to the teaching of their prophet and scripture, they would have recognised the last prophet and scripture in Muhammad and the Qur'an and thus have become followers of this last and definitive Straight Path.

This Muslim understanding is problematic for Christians working within their own paradigm, which rests on the unique position of Jesus as the Word of God incarnate. This means that Jesus *is* the Word of God and not the conveyor of a scripture that he received, like Muhammad, *from* God. The uniqueness and definitive nature of the revelation of God in Jesus means that Christians have to struggle to make sense of the possibility of later revelation, such as the Qur'an, which at significant places differs from and ‘corrects’ Christian understandings. They also have to wrestle with the idea of a prophet, who stands outside the biblical tradition and, as *al-insan al-kamil* (the perfect human being), differs from the model set by Jesus. Christian theologians have an on-going debate concerning the way in which the prophethood of Muhammad can be accommodated within their paradigm and to what extent the Qur'an can be seen as a message from God.

Mutual education about the other faith requires a second level of understanding if there is to be any real growth in understanding and appreciation of the other. This requires a certain suspension of judgement over the issues apparent in the first level and a willingness to seek to understand the other *within their own* paradigm. Although we have referred to this as the second level, in the practice of Christian-Muslim education it actually has priority. Without a deep understanding of the other faith, as those who follow and live it understand it, there can be no real dialogue or

shared education. Muslims know best how they understand Islam and it is not for Christians to tell them how they should understand it better. The same applies to Christians and their Christianity; it is not conducive to dialogue for Muslims to take the position that they know better what Jesus taught and the way in which Christianity *ought* to understand itself. Any serious attempt at dialogue or education between Christians and Muslims requires an understanding of the other as they understand themselves.

### **A paradigm shift**

A paradigm is a way of trying to show how different elements relate to one another within a model that promotes understanding. Both Christianity and Islam contain rich diversity within themselves in terms of the elements and relative weight given to them within any given paradigm. It would be impossible to draw out one paradigm to cover all Muslim understandings of Islam; just as impossible to do the same thing for all Christian understandings of Christianity. In the following paragraphs, I have attempted to draw out two ‘basic’ paradigms. What is important is not that every Muslim or Christian feels adequately portrayed here; what is essential is to see that the two paradigms are fundamentally different and thus to appreciate the magnitude of the shift required to operate within the other paradigm in order to understand that faith.

We consider first a basic Sunni paradigm of Islam. God is transcendent and communicates with humankind through the *kalam allah* (speech/word of God), which is sent down (*tanzil/wahy*) to the Prophet in the Qur'an. The Prophet (*rasul*) receives the Qur'an in passive mode, conveys it to the people, and puts it into practice. He is the living exemplar of a human life directed entirely by the divine revelation; he is thus the perfect human being (*al-insan al-kamil*), whose every word and action is founded on and inspired by divine guidance. In this way, he is the ‘living Qur'an’ and his customary practice (*sunna*) is the second source for an Islamic way of life. Based on these two sources, the scholars of Islam have formulated the way of life (*shari'a*) that is pleasing to God. This way of life is to be implemented by each individual human being through the daily struggle (*jihad*) leading to the twin virtues of God-consciousness (*taqwa*) and patience (*sabr*). The culmination of this life is in living consciously and constantly in the presence of God (*ihsan*), which will be rewarded with the permanent state of Paradise (‘being near to or in the presence of God’). Although this paradigm is exemplified in the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad, it is the timeless paradigm of God’s dealing with humanity stretching back through the line of prophets to Prophet Adam and including Prophet Jesus. For a Christian to understand Islam and Muslims as they understand themselves it is necessary to enter imaginatively into this paradigm. The paradigm also enables the Christian to grasp the Muslim understanding of the ‘pure Christianity’ taught by Prophet Jesus and thus to reflect on the extent to which, over the centuries, Christians are thought to have deviated from it.

The Christian paradigm begins in the same place with the transcendent God, who from eternity communicates with the creation through the Word of God. It was through this Word that everything was created and this Word which spoke through the Law and the biblical prophets before Jesus. The human being is the bearer of the Spirit of God and thus the Word is perceived by the active agent of the Spirit at work within each individual. Thus the Word inspired Moses, who discerned it through the Spirit living in him, and thus formulated the Law. Similarly the Word inspired the prophets, who perceived it through the indwelling Spirit and thus formulated God's message to their communities and expressed it in words of their crafting. Both law-giver and prophets are active participants in formulating God's guidance for the societies in which they live. This process reached its unique conclusion and exemplification in the person of Jesus, who is the same Word spoken not in verbal languages but in 'body talk.' So Jesus *is* the Word and not *the bearer of* the Word; he is thus both a prophet and more than a prophet. He is fully human in every way and so his being and every word and action constitute the revelation of God to humanity. His whole life, from birth, through teaching and actions, to his perfect obedience to the will of God, expressed in his willing, selfless, ignominious death in crucifixion, constitute the revelation, which culminates in his resurrection from the dead and thus perceived entry into 'resurrection life' or 'the life of eternity'. Because the revelation is in the humanity of Jesus, as generations pass and we know more about what it is to be human, so we enter into a deeper understanding of that revelation. The Spirit of God, which lives in every human being, together with the Word, is present in such magnitude in the life of Jesus that Christians understand him to be divine. As divinity cannot be divided, Jesus thus is understood to be both fully human and fully divine throughout his earthly life. When his earthly life came to an end in death, he revealed the true nature of human life, which is to be united in divinity with the one God. Thus the purpose of Jesus is to reveal to humanity that our true eternal nature is divine and so human life is seen as a journey in making real this divine-human nature or divinisation (*theosis*).

Jesus is not the bearer of a scripture but rather he is the Good News (the literal meaning of 'Gospel') written in 'body talk'. The four gospels of the New Testament are divinely-inspired theological writings with human authors, writing in a particular language, and belonging to a particular context and world-view, that craft elements of the life and teaching of Jesus in such a way that they express the faith of the early Christian community. Human beings enter into an awareness of the resurrection life revealed by Jesus through becoming members of the community of believers (expressed in various ways, such as water baptism), an experience which can be spoken of as being 'born again' into this relationship with God ('a new creation'). In this way, the relationship that Jesus had with God by right throughout his life (being fully human and fully divine) is entered into by human beings, not by right, but by adoption. This is a state both of 'being' and also 'becoming': we are growing fully into what we already are. This means that the passage of human life is one of transformation through the free gifts of faith, grace and love radiated by God, so that sin is diminished and our true nature as beings filled with the Spirit of God is fully realised. This involves a life of discipleship following the example of Jesus in every

way, through a life of sacrificial service to humanity. It is strengthened through membership of the community of believers and by drawing close to God in prayer and through symbolic acts that make that relationship actual (sacraments). This leads to a changed perception of the meaning of death as 'entry fully into eternal life', in which we are united with God in that fellowship of abiding love that Christians express as the Trinity.

This Christian paradigm, even expressed as here in its simplest form, is both different to, and more complex than, the Muslim paradigm. Muslims who seek to understand and enter into a dialogue with Christianity need to suspend temporarily their Muslim paradigm of Christianity and enter imaginatively into this Christian one if any progress is to be made. It must be made explicit that *understanding* the other faith is not the same as *agreeing* with that faith. It is not possible to remain either a Muslim or a Christian and *agree* with every aspect of the other faith. The aim of Christian-Muslim education is not agreement with, or conversion to, the other's perspective, but rather to come to an understanding that allows one to see the world and the relationship with God as the other sees it, whilst agreeing to disagree.

### **Three dimensions to understanding**

Both Muslims and Christians want to maintain that their faith is a complete way of life and not just a set of religious beliefs and practices. Faith shapes my relationship with God, my understanding of my own nature and being, my relationship with my fellow human beings and the whole created order, my ethical practice, my spirituality, the way that I live my family life, the kind of work that I do and the way that I relate to all human beings, including believers on other faith journeys. As we seek in Muslim-Christian education to understand each other's faith, this manifestly is not something that can be done just by the accumulation of intellectual knowledge; that is only the first dimension of understanding. However, I need first to seek to understand intellectually what others believe, how they formulate their beliefs and why they formulate them in that way. I need also to understand what it is that they are not saying. I need to understand how those beliefs relate to the lived practice of believers.

To understand another faith requires a second dimension of understanding. I need to feel my way towards the faith experience of the other. So I need to ask myself such questions as: What does it mean to live this kind of a life? How does it affect the core of the human being? We can call this intuitive knowledge; if intellectual knowledge is 'of the head', then intuitive knowledge is 'of the heart'. Intellectual knowledge is grasped in a series of logical propositions but intuitive knowledge is better described as knowing something in its composite form, which can be sensed or grasped with an inner certainty. I know within myself intuitively that I can answer a certain question but my intellect has yet to work out the sequence of steps through which I must go in order to articulate that knowledge. I know in the depths of my being that my partner or parent loves me: my intellect can formulate indications for that but my intuitive knowledge *that* it is so is not based on my intellectual arguments about *how* that can

be demonstrated. Sometimes my heart leads first and I feel that something is right even though I cannot express the arguments why it is so, and sometimes my head leads, in that I know all the arguments but I cannot sense the rightness of the outcome. This is like the act of coming to believe: I can be presented with, and accept, all the intellectual arguments, but the decisive act of faith in which I commit my whole being is not within my grasp; I may know in my head but not believe in my heart.

The third dimension of understanding is on the level of spiritual knowledge. Each individual is in a unique relationship with God and thus we can say that we are on a spiritual path of knowledge. God is one and there are diverse spiritual paths leading to God, each in a sense unique to the individual, but ought there not to be a resonance, a sharing of the sense that God is at work in the life of the other, just as God is at work in my life? This applies within a particular faith, in which a resonance is felt between believers, and yet not all Christians or Muslims believe the same thing: there is legitimate diversity within each of these two faiths. Ought it not then also to apply between the two faiths? Ought not a Muslim to be able to feel a resonance within their own spirit of the spirituality of a Christian and vice versa? In this context, Christians will speak of “testing the spirit at work in the other”. At the mystical level, Muslims and Christians describe a huge sense of common spiritual understanding of the spirit of God at work in the lives of mystics of the other faith, drawing them ever-onwards into a spiritual embrace.

This spiritual knowledge combines with both our intellectual and intuitive knowledge, so that it gives an inner completion, as though a vacuum had been filled or we had ‘come home’ to our rightful abiding place. In Muslim understanding, this inner yearning to come into a relationship with God is epitomised in the covenant with all the pre-embodied souls of human beings in which God asks them, “Am I not your Lord?” and they all chorus in response, “Yes indeed!” [Q.7:172]. In this sense, Islam, like all revealed paths, is the *din al-fitra*, the natural way for human beings to live that leads to inner and eternal fulfilment. The great Christian scholar, Augustine of Hippo (d.430), coined the phrase: “You made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” In both traditions then, we can see that there is a certain degree of spiritual emptiness in the human being who is not abiding in that God-given relationship, which is the way that God designed us to be and to which we are called in love.

### **Exploring complimentary themes**

An important part of Muslim-Christian education is to explore themes that both faiths share whilst allowing them to be at the same time common and different. One preliminary factor is to accept that both faiths use certain technical terms but do not necessarily mean the same by them. If we take the term ‘prophet’ by way of example: When Muslims speak of a prophet, the term means a human being of the highest spirituality chosen by God to receive a new literally revealed message (*rasul*) or call people back to an earlier message (*nabi*), who is sinless and thus infallible, and

therefore an exemplar of godly living. By contrast, the biblical tradition sees prophets as sinners like the rest of humanity, who are called by God to speak a word of truth to a particular community, but the words that they utter are of their own construction under divine inspiration. The same term is used with distinctly different meanings. Our first task in this inter-faith education is to clarify terms precisely to be sure of the meaning given to that term by our own and the other faith tradition.

The first thing that both faiths want to say about God is that God is, in God's very essence, unknowable (ineffable) or beyond all our human categories of understanding (transcategorical). We can make statements about God that are true, e.g., God is all-merciful (*al-Rahman*), but we have no idea of the quality of mercy as it is with God; that is beyond our human category of mercy and thus beyond our comprehension. God is merciful but not merciful as we human beings are, God's mercy is infinitely beyond that. The Muslim tradition expresses this understanding in the saying that, "God has one hundred mercies and sends one mercy to the earth to suffice all creation through all time and keeps ninety-nine in reserve for the Day of Judgement". Even if we human beings could comprehend the sum total of mercy on earth throughout all ages, we would know only one percent of the mercy of God. The mercy of God is unknowable and we can apply the same argument to all God's attributes. In this assertion both Christianity and Islam agree. This leads us to a way of making theological statements, in both traditions, that proceeds by stating the negative: we can only really say what God is not and thus build up 'a word picture' of God as *beyond* all our descriptions and understanding. This is called in Greek, the apophatic approach to making negative statements, which, in a sense, define the parameters of that about which we cannot make positive statements.

Both faith traditions want to say of God that God is one, unique and indivisible. These are really statements that negate their opposites, i.e., that God is many, one of many, or can be divided to share divinity with any other being. Quite what the oneness of God is like from God's perspective is beyond our ability to grasp. Muslims might reflect that this is recognisable in the doctrine of *tawhid* but how does that apply to the Christian doctrine of Trinity? Christians would want to start from the fact that Jesus and all his disciples were Jews and thus worshipped and believed in the one and only God; any notion of plurality in God would have been unthinkable for them. As Christian theological articulation progressed, the Greek philosophical doctrine of Trinity was devised precisely to defend the oneness and indivisibility of God and yet to speak of that reality in a way that allowed them to make sense of the revelation that they had received in Jesus and the power that had been unleashed in their lives in the experience of the Day of Pentecost.

We have already seen that the Christian understanding of Jesus is different to a Muslim understanding of Muhammad. Similarly the process of revelation is different in both traditions, as is their respective understanding of their scriptures. If the Christian wants to come to an understanding of the message of the Qur'an, as Muslims understand it, then it must be read through Muslim eyes. In practice, this means with

the help of an annotated edition that explains how the text is understood; this is the discipline of commentary (*tafsir*). Whilst all Muslims agree that the Arabic text is one and without multiple editions, there are dozens of translations of that one text into other languages and hundreds of works of commentary and they differ substantially. Muslims or Christians who attempt to read the text in any language, including Arabic, without the assistance of the scholarly discipline of the commentators are doomed to misunderstand it. The recent publication of *The Study Quran* (HarperOne, 2015) is a good indication in English of this diversity, drawing, as it does, on some forty-one commentaries on the Qur'an from eighth to twentieth centuries, from various schools and diverse perspectives, to illustrate the ways in which the one text has been understood through multiple, complimentary, and sometimes contradictory, interpretations. God speaks in the Qur'an in the most literal way, as Muslims understand it, but God does not speak in that same literal way in the Bible, as Christians understand it, therefore a methodology that seeks simply to compare verses of the Qur'an with verses from the Bible is doomed to be misleading and unproductive. One is simply not comparing like with like. The hermeneutical tools of interpretation that Christian scholars apply to understanding the New Testament gospels, for example, are quite different to those that Muslim scholars use in interpreting the Qur'an.

Our Muslim-Christian education needs to take in a study of the way in which the two faiths are lived out both in acts of direct worship of God (*ibada*) and in the way in which the social and physical dimensions of creation are brought under God's guidance. We can see the way in which the ritual prayer cycle (*salat*) of Islam punctuates the day and is complimented by informal prayer (*du'a*) and the prayer of the remembrance of God (*dhikr*). A similar pattern of regular prayer and meditation, together with "the raising of the mind and heart to God", can be seen in Christian practice but there are differences in structure and obligation. On deeper investigation, we can see that the epitome of the Muslim's relationship with God as the loving servant (*abd*) in prostration (*sujud*) depicts a different relationship with God to that of the Christian, who stands erect as befits one born into a relationship that takes its meaning from that revealed in Christ (being a co-heir with Christ of the Kingdom of God). The unity of the community that the Christian displays by gathering around the table of the Lord in the communion service can be considered alongside the packed egalitarian ranks of the Muslim ritual prayer, both of which are replicated in prayer gatherings around the world, although the orientation of the Muslim community towards the *ka'ba* in Makka differs in significance, meaning and direction from the Christian community traditionally orientated towards the rising sun, from which direction, figuratively, the Second Coming of Christ is awaited. There is a quantum difference between being a worldwide community that takes careful compass bearings to gather around the *ka'ba* like the spokes of a wheel oriented to its hub and being a community without earthly focus, whose orientation is of no great importance to the majority of believers.



There is scope for a profitable exploration of the part played by economics in the social life of humanity in both traditions. The purification of wealth and its circulation to those in need (*zakat* and *khums*) plus the exhortation to bear the burdens of others (*sadaqa*) can be explored alongside the Christian notions of charity and tithing (passing on one-tenth of one's harvest or income for the good of those in need). Similar notions of justice and fairness in commercial transactions (giving due measure and paying just wages, for example) can be considered in understanding both faiths, and Christians can reflect on their historical relationship with the prohibition of usury in coming to an understanding of the hatred for *riba* in Islam, with its demand that gain can only be made through exposure to proportional risk. Any financial practice that demeans the humanity of another through exploitation would be abhorred by both traditions.

### **Concluding practical points**

Faith is an individual relationship with God that no-one can demand and that cannot be generalised. A group of believers find that they have sufficient ground in common to call themselves Muslims or Christians, but there is no pretence that *all* Muslims or *all* Christians believe exactly the same thing beyond a bare minimum. We could say that all Muslims bear witness to the two linked statements of the *kalima*: There is no god but God Muhammad is the Messenger of God; beyond that lies legitimate diversity. Diversity in Islam is legitimate if it is founded on beliefs grounded in the Qur'an and the *sunna*. If anything, the range of diversity within Christianity is even wider than in Islam and a comparable short formula of distinctive Christian faith would be 'Jesus is Lord'. Given that both faiths have been in existence for many centuries and that diversity has existed throughout, we must assume that it is not reprehensible in the sight of God but rather a blessing. In our Christian-Muslim study we need to be aware of this legitimate diversity within our own and in the other tradition and allow for it. There is always a tendency to say that "my way is the only correct way to interpret the faith" and there is a similar tendency towards finding a form of the other faith that suits our perspective and then to dismiss all else. It is important to remember that 'extremism' can be defined as 'that which lies outside the parameters of legitimate diversity'.

Islam and Christianity have 'wonderful ideals' and 'sordid realities' both in the contemporary world and historically. If we wallow in the sordid realities, then we never understand the high ideals; similarly, if we focus only on the wonderful ideals then we can be accused of escapism and running from the realities. We do not know how sordid some of the realities are until we have grasped the wonderful ideals and can see how far short of them they fall; therefore the starting point must be the ideals. The great temptation in inter-faith study is to compare 'my wonderful ideals' with 'your sordid realities' and thus to be guilty of distorting the work of God in the other faith tradition; we must consciously compare like with like and always have a sense of history.

We will not go far in our study of the other way of life before we come across differences and so we need to work out a way to deal with them. We can divide differences into three categories: disparities of fact, varieties of practice, and differences of theologically expressed doctrine. Disparities of fact need to be examined against the criterion of how critical they are. On the one hand, is it of ultimate importance which of the two sons of Abraham he was called to sacrifice? On the other hand, the Qur'anic verses about the end of the earthly life of Jesus cannot be interpreted to equate to the Christian understanding of his death and resurrection to eternal life; this disparity of fact is both critical and unresolvable from our human perspective. How then are we to handle this? Our education must take us to the point of understanding both what the other believes and why they cannot 'give way' and admit either that 'the Qur'an got it wrong here' or 'Jesus being taken up to God alive is sufficient for Christian faith'. Once those understandings have been reached, then the question must be referred to the wisdom and judgement of God on the Day of Judgement.

There are significant variations in practice between the two faiths, e.g., the way in which fasting is observed. There is wide diversity within Christian practice and some communities have an extensive discipline that they observe but there is nothing that equates with the obligatory, month-long total fast of Ramadan. When the Qur'an says that fasting was prescribed also in the earlier revelations, must that be interpreted to mean something the same as or equivalent to Ramadan? Is the Christian practice authentic but different or must the Christians have lost the purity of their original obligations?

Finally, there are differences of theologically expressed doctrine. These need to be investigated thoroughly in the hope of clarity if not resolution. What exactly are Christian theologians meaning when they use the title Son of God of Jesus? How do we understand the Qur'an when it says that God is far exalted above having a son? Are the two traditions talking about the same thing? Such differences of theological expression might be resolved by more theological discussion and a clearer exposition of what the doctrine means precisely. This re-working of theological discourse is a central aspect of Christian-Muslim education.