

Christians and Muslims: diverse approaches to the one God

The substance of this article was first published in the journal of the Irish Dominicans, Doctrine and Life, Vol 65, No 10, December 2015, p.15-23

Christians and Muslims have interacted since the time of Muhammad. According to Muslim tradition, Muhammad was recognised as a youth by a Christian hermit in the Syrian desert and his uncle was told to take good care of him “because the sign of prophethood is upon him”. The Qur'an shares a good number of people and incidents with the Bible and readers of the Qur'an are asked to consult ‘the people of the earlier scripture’ for the background to some episodes so as to make their meaning clear. Muhammad saw himself as standing in the Abrahamic line and the Qur'an acknowledged Moses and Jesus as earlier prophets sent by God. In this way, Islam understands the continuity of revelations and prophets and thus the spiritual and inherited link between the three ‘Abrahamic faiths’. “Your God and our God is one”, says the Qur'an [Q. 29:46], and so, when the infant Muslim community were under persecution from the idol-worshippers of Arabia, Muhammad sent nearly a third of them to seek asylum with the Christian King of Abyssinia. When, in 631, a delegation of Christians, the bishop and civil leaders, from the Arabian city of Najran came to visit Muhammad in Medina, he received them in his mosque and allowed them to offer their Christian prayers in the mosque. The one God was being worshipped, even though in diverse ways.

This recognition of a shared belief in the one God, with some biblical teachings, figures and incidents in common, and the assertion by the Qur'an that Jesus received a scripture from God and was a genuine prophet, just as Muhammad was a genuine prophet and received a scripture from God, did not mean that the two faiths did not have significant differences in their understanding of God. Similarly they differed in their understanding of the nature, mission and end-of-life story of Jesus. The delegation from Najran had a serious theological disagreement with Muhammad and the Qur'an over the true nature and significance of Jesus. This is one of the challenges of Christian-Muslim relations, just as in Christian relations with the Jews: How can it be that we are three communities worshipping the one God and yet we understand God and Jesus significantly differently? If Jews recognised the messianic role of Jesus and his identity as the incarnate Word of God as do Christians, they would cease to be Jews. The situation is similar with Muslims; living with difference is part of the challenge that we have been set by God. In my view, this is God's way of forcing us to a degree of humility in allowing God to be God and not permitting us to force our theological understanding of God on God as though we were capable of knowing God in God's very self. God always remains ineffable, beyond all our categories of knowledge or speech. And yet at the same time, as Christians and Muslims, we have to be true to the planting of God amongst us and not seek to redefine our inherited faith to make it more comestible to the other. Differences remain between us: We are called to be faithful witnesses and leave the outcome up to God. As the Qur'an puts it,

“on the Day of Judgement, God will make clear all those things about which we disagreed” [Q. 16:92].

Theological discourse in history

There were diverse groups of Christians in all the lands surrounding the Arabian Peninsula in the time of Muhammad. In Egypt and Abyssinia (modern Ethiopia), the Monophysite form of Christianity was dominant. Iraq was the centre of the Church of the East, which had a Nestorian theology. The Byzantine understanding of the two natures in the one person of Christ was dominant in the Eastern Roman Empire, which spread to include Syria and Palestine. The first Byzantine theologian to write seriously about Islam was the last of the Church Fathers, John of Damascus (d.750), who adopted biblical terminology and thus referred to them as ‘Ishmaelites.’ He regarded Islam as a Christian heresy. The Nestorian Catholicos Timothy I (d.823) spoke somewhat ambiguously of Muhammad as “walking in the way of the (biblical) prophets.” The Arians, who dominated in North Africa, which Islamic rule reached at the turn of the eighth century, had an easier step in accepting Islam as they did not recognise the divinity of Jesus, which accorded with Muslim belief.

By the year 750, 120 years after the death of Muhammad, Islamic rule had spread from its original base in the Arabian Peninsula to the Pyrenees at the norther border of Spain, throughout North Africa including Egypt, around the Mediterranean to include Palestine, Syria and up to Armenia, and eastwards to encompass Iraq and Iran. The majority of those who came under Islamic rule were Christians, Jews and, in Iran, Zoroastrians. The Qur'an taught that these three religions were founded by earlier prophets, who brought genuine scriptures from God, and thus they were called collectively ‘the people of the earlier revelations’ or *Ahl al-Kitab* (lit. The People of the Book). As such, they had the right to maintain and practise their religions in the Muslim lands, even though Muhammad and the Qur'an brought the final and universal revelation from God, which was intended to correct errors that had crept into these three religions during the centuries since their original prophets and scriptures. This set the scene for historical living side-by-side, which endured through the centuries, even though successive generations eventually largely converted to follow the way of Islam. It is significant to note in passing that during the years of the Christian Reconquista in Spain, when Jews and Muslims were forced out of the Iberian Peninsula, the Jews were taken in and resettled in the Muslim lands and allowed to practise their religion. They are known to us as the Sephardic (Spanish-speaking) Jews, who remained in their adopted homelands until the twentieth century, especially until the creation of the State of Israel. In the 1930s, some thirty per cent of the population of Baghdad were Jews, it being the capital of Sephardic Jewry.

The political situation of Muslims facing Christians across the Mediterranean, including at times Mediterranean islands such as Sicily and Malta being under Muslim rule, set the tone of polemic in Christian-Muslim relations. Arguments were found to declare the other faith to be false or wayward to defend the truth of one’s own religion. This often descended to attacks on the person of Muhammad and to seeing

the Qur'an as a corrupted distortion of biblical revelation. Such political/polemic background can be seen in the two centuries of Christian Crusades, which confronted Muslims militarily. There were more positive approaches too, such as the missionary profile set by St Francis of Assisi in his *Regula non bullata* (1221), in which his Brothers were to go amongst the Muslims, being subject to them, seeking to serve those most in need, without in any way vilifying those things that Muslims held to be holy. They were to live lives of such exemplary goodness that they provoked questions, which they were to answer guided by Christian charity, using gentle words and wisdom.

A modern turning point

When the Catholic bishops of the world assembled for the Second Vatican Council (1962-5), a revised position as regards the Jews was on the agenda in recognition of the part played by Christian theology in the lead up to the Holocaust in Germany. Through the sessions of the Council, bishops who lived amongst Muslims and followers of other Eastern religions widened the perspective to argue that the Council should say something about these religions too. This resulted in this highest teaching authority of the Catholic Church taking a new and constructive position as regards Islam and Muslims. In *Lumen Gentium* (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, §16) and *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions, §3), the first positive teaching of the Catholic magisterium was enunciated. Muslims were affirmed to be worshipping the one and only God, as do Christians, and they were to be esteemed for their life of prayer, fasting, charity and submission to the sometimes inscrutable will of God. This marked a turning point, which was later taken up by other mainstream Christian churches in the decades that followed. In spite of the fact that Muslims, like Jews, take radically different positions on the understanding of God, Jesus and the salvation which he brought, they were nevertheless to be esteemed for their religious life and their worship of the one, true God.

This affirmation reflected a breakthrough in modern Christian-Muslim relations, in which it was recognised that Christians and Muslims lived side-by-side in many parts of the world; they often inter-married and both faiths were thus found in the same families in Africa and Asia. This common life found expression in shared festivals and even shared places of pilgrimage in countries like Syria. They made common cause together against various forms of oppression and injustice around the world and thus shared in the struggle for a better life for all. A new wave of theological discussion arose in which the polemics of the past were replaced by mutually seeking to discern the ways of God and a better understanding of the things on which they both agreed and diverged. Given that Muslims and Christians were both engaged in the worship of God, the way was opened up for a sharing in that spiritual encounter with God, which lies at the heart of a life of faith.

The sources of Islam

There is an innate theological challenge in affirming that Muslims worship God and are to be esteemed for their religious life and practice: How can these be divorced from the sources of Islam that make Muslims what they are as a godly people? Vatican II was silent on this question. It made no comment on the nature of Muhammad as prophet or the status of the Qur'an as a revelation from God. These have become the subjects of discussion between the theologians of the respective faiths.

The foundation of Islam rests on the Muslim belief that the Qur'an is a direct, literal, verbal revelation from God given to Muhammad, who was the conveyor of a text that originated not with him, but with God. A Christian cannot simply affirm a belief in the Qur'an in the same way as do Muslims. On the theological level, the Qur'an puts serious question marks against the Christian doctrines of Trinity, Incarnation and the salvation brought by Christ. As far as statements of fact are concerned, the Qur'an speaks of Jesus not being crucified to death and thus denies the resurrection of Christ to eternal life, as Christians understand it. Rather it sees him as 'being taken up' to God, where he awaits the command of God to return to the earth in the End Times to resume the same, currently suspended, human life and lead the great battle of good versus evil until his eventual death and burial, to await the General Resurrection with the rest of humankind. For these reasons alone, a Christian cannot accept the revelation of the Qur'an as Muslims do. What then can be said by a Christian of the Qur'an? In the age of polemics, this question was answered by denying its divine authorship and seeing it as a text composed by Muhammad and others, partially editing existing sources, some of which were drawn from accepted biblical material and some from texts that had been discarded as apocryphal by the Christian Church. One challenge given to Christian theologians in the modern period is to see if there is another way of viewing the Qur'an as containing an authentic message from God whilst stopping short of the Muslim position for the reasons outlined above.

Considering the position of the Qur'an cannot be done without reflecting on the role of Muhammad as prophet, as Muslim tradition is definite in understanding him to be the recipient and conveyor of the text and not its author or editor. In the age of polemics, an attack on the authenticity of the Qur'an went hand-in-hand with an attack on the integrity of Muhammad as prophet. In Muslim understanding, a prophet is protected from sin and thus cannot be a deceiver in such a matter. Muhammad is seen as the sinless exemplar of the Qur'anic message; he put it into practice perfectly as, to use a Muslim phrase, 'the Living Qur'an'. Again, a Christian cannot accept the prophethood of Muhammad as Muslims do, who see him as the sinless, infallible exemplar of the literal revelation of the Word of God in the Qur'an. This brings to the fore a central point in Christian-Muslim theological discussion: We must clearly define our terms to make sure that we are speaking about the same thing. Biblical prophets are not sinless, infallible or recipients of a literal verbal revelation from God, therefore to use the term 'prophet' without a clear definition in Muslim-Christian discussion leads to widespread misunderstanding. Christian theologians have thus

addressed the question of whether Muhammad can be seen as a prophet according to the biblical understanding of the term; they have come up with different answers. Some have arrived at an affirmative answer and others have answered negatively on the grounds, typically, that Christian scripture scholars interpret the earlier biblical prophetic tradition as pointing towards the final fulfilment of prophecy in the revelation and person of Christ, into which category Muhammad and the Qur'an do not fit.

The Qur'anic picture of Jesus

As has become clear above, Muslims see prophets as human beings of the highest spiritual and ethical character. No greater dignity can God confer on any human being, whilst always stopping short from attributing any divinity to a prophet. Thus when the Qur'an affirms Jesus as a prophet of God, it gives him the highest possible accolade and status. Jesus in the Qur'an is born of the Virgin Mary, who became pregnant through the divine command 'be' with no intermediary of any kind. He is a sinless prophet, a 'word from God' and the bearer of the 'spirit of God' just like other prophets. He received a scripture from God, called in the Qur'an the *Injil*, as a literal, verbal revelation in a comparable way to Muhammad's reception of the Qur'an. He thus taught the 'Straight Path' to Paradise revealed by God and established a community that followed his Way (*shari'a*). The Qur'an explicitly says that "God is far exalted above having a son" [Q. 4:171]: it will have nothing to do with a doctrine of incarnation, God must always be held to be totally transcendent. The normative title given to Jesus in the Qur'an is 'Jesus son of Mary' in contradistinction to 'son of God'. This gives rise to a discussion amongst the theologians of the two faiths as to whether the *biological* reference to Jesus as the 'son of God' can be equated with the biblically-based *title* of the Christian tradition of Jesus as the 'Son of God'.

Can the Christian understanding of Jesus as the Word of God 'written in flesh-language' in the Incarnation be compared with a Qur'anic understanding of the prophet Jesus *receiving* and *conveying* a scripture from God as do Muhammad and other book-bearing prophets in Islam? Is Jesus in himself 'the Way' or a bearer of the teaching of a godly way to Paradise? Can the Christian tradition retain its integrity without the sacrificial death and resurrection to eternal life of Jesus when compared to the 'ascension to God of an un-dead Jesus'? Is the destiny of human beings as co-heirs with Christ to the Kingdom, as partakers in the life of the resurrection here and now, and a spiritual path of *theosis* by incorporation into the fellowship of the Trinity, possible within this Islamic framework?

Even a brief perusal of such questions highlights an important aspect of Christian theological engagement with Islam: We see our own tradition more clearly in the mirror of Islam and can discern afresh the importance and centrality of the specificity of the Christian message incorporate in Jesus. Far from Christian-Muslim theological exploration being a dilution of Christianity, it can actually make for a sharpening of a perception of what is central to Christian faith.

Where does that leave us?

The Christian engagement with Islam is a repetition and extension of Christian engagement with Judaism: the two are not the same. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are three faiths with a belief in and worship of the one, same and only God. Each has its particular and specific insight into the God-Human relationship. Each must be faithful to God's planting and seek to deepen that faith in discussion with the others, whilst leaving God to be God in the knowledge of the common Final Judgement and our accountability before God for fidelity to the way to which each has been called. Those things in each faith that are incompatible with the other faiths must be clarified and retained when essential to the message. Each can learn from the insights of the other on the theological level and use those insights to refine our own following in faith. On the level of the practice of religion, all can learn from the discipline and ethical conduct of the others. Together we can build a more just society and a world order that promotes human thriving. We can sit in awe and wonder at the tremendous mystery of God who seeks fellowship with every human being; each of whom is the bearer of the Spirit of God and thus a fellow-traveller on the path of spiritual closeness to God, who lies wrapped in mystery, beyond our ability fully to comprehend and always offering the potential for a deeper embrace of the infinite. The life of faith, for both Christians and Muslims, is an invitation to walk on the path laid down for us in trust and in the knowledge that our paltry attempts to express that faith in words of theological doctrine will always be limited until "we see indeed as now we are seen".