

Five Years of Understanding Islam in London A Reflection, December 2010

**Dr Chris Hewer,
Sometime St Ethelburga Fellow in Christian-Muslim Relations**

Preamble

For the five calendar years 2006 to 2010, I had the pleasure to be able to concentrate exclusively on promoting a better understanding of Islam, Christian-Muslim relations, the situation of Muslims in Western Europe and to attempt to enhance Muslims' understanding of Christianity. This work was nominally hosted by the St Ethelburga Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, Bishopsgate, and funded by a syndicate of four charitable bodies. The brief was to develop courses, promote an understanding, raise awareness and build up a cohort of people who were interested in multiplying this work in their own neighbourhoods or professional lives, so that the work could be taken up by an appropriate institution. The geographical focus was on Greater London with an awareness of the need for occasional programmes in other parts of Britain and Europe.

The genius of the project can be indicated in the following ways:

- Through the generosity of the members of the syndicate, I was able to offer my services without charge, including travel and office expenses.
- St Ethelburga's hosted my presence on their web site, which allowed for advertisement and recruitment for the study days that I did for them and allowed us to build up an e-list of people interested in the Understanding Islam project. Throughout the five years, St Ethelburga's, in the persons of their Director, Simon Keyes, and the team and volunteers, has provided stalwart support and taken an interest in the project and their Fellow in an exemplary way; the original concept was one of symbiosis and I believe that this has been fulfilled.
- The lack of a physical location for the project (I only actually "worked" at St Ethelburga's for nine Saturdays each year) meant that its overheads were extraordinary low; there was never the immense burden of "having to generate funds to preserve the fabric of the building", pay administrative costs, etc.
- Courses, study days and talks went to people wherever they naturally gather by habitation, interest or work. In this way the logistics of attracting people to a teaching centre, wherever it might be located, were avoided. This is of particular note in an area the size of Greater London, where I could easily spend six hours per day in travelling to reach teaching locations; and this given the fact that I was able to take rooms

fairly centrally. Courses etc. were hosted in religious, educational, community or domestic locations that were “within the comfort zone” for participants and could be provided either free or at a nominal cost by the hosts.

- There was an explicit agreement from the outset that I was to avoid involvement in committees, working parties, boards of enquiry, commissions and suchlike, therefore being able to devote all my time and energy to the project itself.
- The project grew on the basis of securing the services of an individual with proven knowledge, skills and experience. I had an academic background in Christian theology, Islamic studies, pedagogy and inter-faith relations spread across four decades. I had a proven track record in teaching about Islam, including explicitly to the target audiences and enjoyed a degree of respect within both Christian and Muslim communities. The “course book” for the project (*Understanding Islam: the first ten steps*, London: SCM) was published in April 2006 and during the London years has sold around 5,500 copies, 50% of which were sold in relation to the project’s work directly. The much shorter basic introduction: *The Essence of Islam*, aimed at the widest possible audience, has similarly sold around 2,500 copies directly in relation to project events.

Report on activities

This section aims to give a detailed overview of the range of work undertaken by the UI project during the London years.

- The basic teaching unit of the project has been the 20-hour UI course, which has been delivered 71 times during the years in question (113 times in total, the first 42 being in Birmingham, 1999-2005). The course has been delivered in three formats: ten 2-hour sessions once per week, intensively over three or four consecutive days, and divided into blocks (e.g. three Saturdays, two weekends). Course numbers range from an established team of four to an eclectic gathering of around 70; the average number attending would be in the region of 30 per course, thus making the total number of participants over 3,000 (well over 2,000 during the London years). Against the trend of adult education courses, numbers of participants *always* remained stable throughout the duration and generally increased over the initial weeks as people brought along their friends. Many people bought the course book, which enabled them to concentrate on the delivery secure in the knowledge that they had all relevant names, dates, technical terms and content for further reference; it also meant that people could catch up on a week’s material if they were prevented from attending on occasion. The courses were delivered in churches, mosques and synagogues, religious and secular community

rooms/halls, schoolrooms, chaplaincies and individual's homes. The weekly courses were delivered in groups of six (daytime/evening, Tues, Weds and Thurs), three terms per year (potential max.18 courses/year). If possible, courses were arranged so that two were in the same/adjacent location(s) to give people the opportunity to switch should they have a diary clash. It is a measure of their commitment that people would often struggle to travel to another venue rather than miss a week (one person actually appeared in four venues during the same ten-week period!). A noteworthy feature is the number of these courses that were jointly sponsored by Christian and Muslim local initiatives, often with the course location being spilt between centres of the two faiths. Such joint sponsorship, which brings with it the commitment of Muslim participation throughout the course, can help to cement and expand local Christian-Muslim partnerships. Each ten-week course included a guided visit to a mosque, almost invariably in the same neighbourhood as the course location. For many participants, this was their first venture over the threshold of a mosque and provided a platform for establishing the confidence and contacts to develop local Christian-Muslim initiatives.

- The format of a six-hour study day was developed and such study days evolved into three distinct categories: a basic introduction, an intensive thematic follow-up, and a day tailored to suit the needs of a particular audience.
 - The basic introductory day was taught three times per year at St Ethelburga's and dozens of times in other locations. The format was to hold four 90-minute sessions: an Islamic overview, vertical dimensions of Islam, building a just society and Open House (to give people the opportunity to set their own agenda).
 - Intensive follow-up days were normally developed as St Ethelburga Saturday Schools (six/year) and then offered on a wider geographical field. It was expected that people had either completed a ten-week course or at least a basic introductory study day so that there was something upon which to build. As the years passed, regular members of the St Ethelburga Saturday School community took the initiative in setting the agenda for topics to be covered in the subsequent year. Topics included:
 - Deciphering the complexities of Muslim groupings
 - Muhammad as an example for Christians
 - Lessons from Muslim Spain
 - First insights into Shi'a Islam
 - Islam and other faiths
 - Jesus and Muhammad for Muslims and Christians
 - Muslims in Britain: contemporary issues
 - "Doctor Hewer's Surgery"
 - Can only Christians be saved?

Muslims in Britain and Western Europe

From conception to the hereafter

Be careful with Muhammad!

The Muslim Jesus

Old Testament figures in the Islamic tradition

Christian theological explorations in relation to Islam

Introduction to Islamic Political and Economic Thought

- Various groups came forward asking for a tailored study day to explore certain aspects of Islam and help the group to relate them to their work or particular interests. Often these groups belonged to a specific profession, *inter alia*:

Counsellors

Alcohol and drug addiction therapists

Teachers

Clergy

Evangelists

Police

Civic servants

Trainee teachers

Social enterprise activists

Church of England Readers

Faith activists

Local year-long community volunteers

Development and Aid workers

- Many opportunities presented themselves for occasional talks, formal lectures, panel discussions, and discussion formats with spontaneous questions. These could include a 15-minute address at Sunday service, talking to a specialist audience such as an inter-faith group, speaking to a group of university students, in-service talks, annual lectures, speaking to Sixth Form pupils, religious/community interest groups, and addressing Muslim festival gatherings.
- Relatively few opportunities presented themselves to help Muslims better to understand Christianity; these invitations increased in number with confidence in the speaker and growth in awareness of the need. These included a seminar series in a Muslim institute of Islamic studies, study days, short courses and occasional talks in mosques or Islamic centres. Time was also spent exploring with other Christians how they could most effectively talk about their faith in a way that made sense to Muslims.
- Numerous opportunities arose to speak, give interviews and make programmes for Muslim satellite television programmes, these might be on current affairs topics, marking religious events and festivals or dealing with specific Islamic issues such as the concept of *hijab*.

- Muslim groups came forward to ask for help with content and presentation in developing materials for specialist in-service training about Islamic topics, e.g. community awareness training for local neighbourhood police units and teachers.
- Assistance was given with reviewing school RE books that touched on Islam or inter-faith material.
- Individual guidance would be sought by journalists, research students, visiting inter-faith activists, religious leaders, politicians, administrators, educators, charitable bodies and suchlike.
- An e-learning course on Understanding Islam was developed in partnership with a team comprising leading Muslim scholars and computer specialists.
- Only one opportunity was forthcoming to assist in the education of clergy undergoing initial training, viz. to deliver two sessions (repeated in two further locations) for the St Mellitus training scheme.
- Invitations from Muslims to be involved in their projects has been a signal element in the project (it is also noteworthy that by far the majority of church-sponsored UI courses attract Muslim participants, through friendship links, by invitation or through curious members of the public who see the notice and ask to join in):
 - On a few occasions, I have been asked to take part in training sessions for *da'wa* (inviting people to the way of Islam) and for Muslim presenters of Islam at exhibitions and suchlike. It is not my place to make *da'wa* on behalf of Islam but it has been a useful opportunity to explore the theme: "How do we talk about Islam in a way that makes sense to non-Muslims in Britain?"
 - I have been invited by a Muslim group to assist in the preparation and delivery of RE resource materials for use in schools to improve knowledge of the spirit that lies behind Muslim practice.
- An indication of the shortage of personnel in the field can be seen through the invitations that I have accepted for teaching in other parts of Europe: the whole UI course (e.g. in Berlin and Mainz), UI study days (e.g. in Berlin, Lund and Dublin), UC for Muslims study days (Dublin) and occasional talks around topical questions (e.g. Copenhagen and Malmö).
- Useful patterns have developed for deepening peoples' initial interest by a regular pattern of (annual) study days, e.g. around London: Greater Ham, Forest Hill, and further afield: Bishops Stortford, Sheffield and in Kent. Again a useful pattern in church-sponsored work has been to do an intensive day for clergy and church workers on Friday, then stay overnight to do a general introductory day on Saturday.
- One year, St Ethelburga's hired a tent at the Greenbelt Festival and I did four sessions for them to packed audiences, which indicates another method of delivery.

- One problem with Christian-Muslim relations is how to multiply the effect in wider society (I reckon that everyone who comes on a UI programme is talking to five people at home and at work and thus multiplying the impact of the message). Useful ways that we have found to address this have been the thematic follow-up days, which have catered for a dedicated band of multipliers, whose knowledge and confidence have expanded substantially. Similarly “Dr Hewer’s Surgery” allowed people to bring along topics that they wanted to explore and feed back. The St Ethelburga UI follow-up e-list has more than a thousand subscribers, who can be circulated with useful material even after the close of the project.
- In addition to researching and writing new material for courses, thematic follow-up days and specialist training, I have been able to write and publish a range of material: two edited books: *We have justice in common: Christian and Muslim voices from Asia and Africa*, Berlin: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2010 and *Christian Lives Given to the Study of Islam*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2011, chapters for *Festschriften* for Profs. David Kerr and Christian Troll, and numerous articles for learned and popular journals.

Reflection

In reflecting on these experiences, the following points may be noted:

- I arrived in London with few contacts and no institutional structure to promote the project. In the first term, the goal was set to use these existing contacts for one course respectively in North and South London hosted by Anglican contacts, and one each hosted by Methodist and Catholic churches. The message of quality and availability spread by personal referral so that no “advertising” was necessary after the first eighteen months; subsequently the diary filled to capacity by personal recommendation.
- Helpful methods of initial promotion included a meeting of Methodist Superintendents from the London District, meeting Anglican Area Deans and other senior clergy, one Anglican diocese took the initiative of scheduling a course as part of its provision for in-service Continuing Ministerial Education, similarly through study days for teachers through a Diocesan Board of Education, a letter of recommendation sent out by an Area Bishop and an Archdeacon (both with personal experience of the project), a course sponsored by a Catholic Adult Education Centre, promotion through inter-faith groups/centres, the London Mennonite Centre and Quaker networking.
- Three courses were sponsored by the University of the Third Age (older people often have time for daytime courses and are actively involved in their wider families and communities to extend the message).

- The style of delivery meant that participants were encouraged to take an active part in shaping the programme for each course by frequently contributing questions and reflections during classes and helping to set the agenda in weeks eight and ten. Such questions could be extremely wide-ranging and required an ability to handle unexpected subject matter instantly and/or to research a fuller answer for a subsequent week.
- Content was always designed to be comprehensive and nuanced to cover the various schools of interpretation of Islam amongst Muslims and break the stereotype of “monolithic Islam”. Habitually, a simple question provoked a nuanced and complex response. Participants were assisted to see questions not only as regards their religious nature but also against their historic, political, social and economic contexts. Answers aimed to “de-exceptionalise” Muslims and Islam by looking at parallels in other faith/ideological communities both historically and contemporaneously.
- Through the generosity of the syndicate, the fact that courses etc. could be offered free-of-charge was of significant importance. Had participants been required to pay for courses, I am quite sure that this would have limited initial take-up. The numbers of participants, consistency of attendance, constancy of personal recommendation for future courses and general engagement indicates the level of appreciation. The philanthropic spirit and action of the syndicate enabled me to follow the principle: “freely you have received, so freely give”.
- By being educated in both Christian and Muslim theological traditions, I was able to help participants to see and reflect on similarities and differences; and then to assay which differences were essential to each faith and which tangential. It was utterly commonplace for Christians to assert towards the end of a course that by studying Islam in this way they had not only learnt a good deal about it but also learnt about and been empowered to reflect upon their own Christian faith; the same would be true *mutatis mutandis* for Muslim participants.
- The presence of Muslim participants in courses, whether as co-sponsors or by open enrolment, and the fact that course content did not alter accordingly prevented any notion that this was “a Christian reading of Islam” or a closed Christian discourse “about them”. The ideal would be for a joint Christian-Muslim team presentation of material but the vision, funding and personnel for such is still lacking. On several occasions, a Muslim man or woman knowledgeable about their faith became a welcome and profitable resource person in a course. Such Muslim presence led to requests to deliver some input in a Muslim setting about Christianity.

- The diverse nature of London was reflected in the frequency of participants confiding that they had Muslim family connections, whilst not being Muslims themselves, e.g. through marriage, a son/daughter who had become a Muslim or who was married to/going out with a Muslim. People with experience from other countries with wider Christian-Muslim interaction, e.g. some African or Asian countries, were able to bring a degree of personal reflection to course discussions.
- Through having a Greater London brief, courses were offered in many different social circles. Some courses were offered in areas of majority/significant minority Muslim residential presence, others were held in areas where participants' interaction with Muslims was as employers or on a professional basis, whilst for others, the interaction was limited to absorbing the mass media and news. Similarly courses needed to adapt infinitely to the educational backgrounds of participants, which could range from persons of limited basic education to highly educated "persons of influence" with considerable specialist knowledge to share. This called for a certain intellectual elasticity and creativity (not to mention humility!) on the part of the presenter.

Pointers to the future

Although the UI project in London has now come to an end, certain lasting effects can be anticipated:

- No-one should underestimate the number of people, both directly and indirectly, whose lives have been changed by their encounter with the project and whose perceptions of Islam etc. have been altered, broadened and indeed enlightened.
- A virtual presence will be maintained on the St Ethelburga website where an Understanding Islam page will be created to host articles and other resource materials.
- The St Ethelburga UI follow-up e-list will continue so that interested persons can be informed of forthcoming events and publications that can maintain and extend their interest.
- The distance learning course hopefully will extend the reach of the project to a worldwide audience.
- The RE resource aspect of the work will continue and these resources will be made available also on the St Ethelburga web page.
- St Ethelburga's will produce a short booklet in its resource series that will assist those who wish to reflect upon and implement some of the experience gained.