

A Journey into Understanding

Reflections on the Understanding Islam programme in London

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Reaching the starting point

For much of the last dozen years, I have been running courses, writing and talking to people to help them to understand Islam and Christian-Muslim relations. For six years in Birmingham (1999-2005), when I was the Adviser on Inter-Faith Relations to the Bishop of Birmingham, my focus widened to include practical and structural relations between all the major faiths in that great cosmopolitan city. For the last five years (2006-2010), I worked in London with a narrower focus – precisely to develop adult popular education in understanding Islam for Christians and others, understanding Christianity for Muslims, Christian-Muslim relations in history and today, and exploring the multi-faceted world of Muslims and the West. This work was generously funded by a syndicate of four charitable bodies, both Muslim and Christian, of which the St Ethelburga Centre for Reconciliation and Peace was one, and so I was known as the St Ethelburga Fellow in Christian-Muslim Relations. But the story does not begin there!

I began the study of Christian theology some four decades ago. This was a time, in the 70s, when the theological and Christian worlds were in “renewal mode”. It was after the War, with the knowledge of what European Christians had done; after the development of the World Council of Churches and the flowering of the ecumenical movement; after the windows in the Catholic community were opened by the Second Vatican Council to allow the “winds of the Spirit” to blow through; finally after a massive burst of energy in the field of theology that saw the ascent of such names as Barth, Tillich, Moltmann and Pannenberg, on the Reformed side, and Rahner, Schillebeeckx and Küng amongst Catholics, which included such profound movements as Liberation Theology and Charismatic Renewal. It was in the context of such a multicoloured theological world that I began my preparation with teachers and books from across the Christian spectrum both East and West. This was supplemented by studies in education theory and practice, and followed by several years of classroom experience before the study of Islam opened before me.

It was in 1975 that Dr David Kerr, a visionary scholar and gifted teacher, established the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations in the Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham. This Centre was special because it was created with the vision of Christian-Muslim partnership at the levels of staff, advisers, students and funding. When I joined in 1986, it was a thriving

meeting place for people and ideas from both communities (more can be read on this website in the articles on *The Study Centre at Selly Oak* and *Troll in Selly Oak*). Over a dozen years of studying and working at the Centre, building competence in the Islamic disciplines, specialising in Islamic education and Muslims in the West, and culminating with a doctorate in Islamic studies, I was being prepared for the work of the Understanding Islam programme.

A spiritual preparation

“We go this way not by choice but by guidance”. When people ask how I got into this work, the answer on one level is simple, I needed to know something about Islam for my work as a specialist RE teacher, but the deeper levels are more complex. I had no idea of where I would end up when I began my study of Islam – all that I can say is that it was one of those kicks periodically delivered in our lives by Providence that moves us into a new relationship with the chequerboard of destiny.

This work is on the margins. It is neither central nor at the top of the list of importance for the Christian or Muslim communities. It is not central in theological study, life within the religious communities or in terms of career advancement. It is often misunderstood by the secular world, which thinks that it is about “community cohesion” or fails to understand it at all, thinking that these religions must be in competition if not open hostility. It is the work of margin-dwellers, who glimpse visions and follow ideals in a way that needs no external affirmation. This requires the spirituality of the solitary, of one caught in the divine embrace, more through claim than through choice, one who submits the will to God without needing to see the whole picture.

The sphere of Christian-Muslim encounter is, first and foremost, the realm of two faith communities under God. The encounter is not just theological, cultural or social; it is also profoundly a spiritual exploration in which one is challenged to “let God be God” and not to attempt to shape God according to one’s own prejudiced ideas. Someone who works in this inter-faith world must be prepared to replicate the outer struggle of theology and practice with the inner struggle of allowing God to make sense of what God is doing in one’s own heart. The inner journey must accompany the outer wrestling or else it becomes an academic exercise or, worse still, a means of career development or a device to win funds from sponsoring bodies. For the Christian practitioner, this requires that one allows the Word that was uniquely revealed in Jesus and that spoke through the Qur’an to shape one’s life and work in such a way that the teacher says, like Jesus to his enquirers, “come and see”, sit and listen, weigh the experience of Understanding Islam in your heart and allow yourself to hear the judgement of the Word speaking in tones that you cannot ignore. Studying, working alongside, teaching about another faith tradition under God is a transformative experience and those who undertake it must expect to be changed by the experience! For the Christian studying Islam, it is

to face the reality of a Muslim critique of my faith. For the Christian teaching about Islam, it is to stand condemned by words from my own lips when exploring honestly Muslim views of the distortions of the teaching of Jesus that comprise contemporary Christianity.

The programme in a nutshell

In 1999, another margin-dweller, Pat McCaffrey, with decades of service in Pakistan and elsewhere, was asked “to give some talks about Islam” as part of his assignment to raise awareness amongst Christians of their mission in the world. He asked me along as a resource person and soon thereafter disappeared to pastures new leaving me with an embryonic idea. Over some years of trial and error, refinement, consultation and evaluation, the principal Understanding Islam course took shape. It is a twenty-hour course, normally given in ten two-hour sessions but it can also be given as three separate study days or as an intensive programme over three or four consecutive days. The structure and content is best seen by reading the coursebook *Understanding Islam: the first ten steps* (London: SCM, 2006) in which each chapter represents one session. This course has been delivered 115 times to date (72 of them in London '06-10) to an average attendance of thirty people from all ages (16-102!) and all levels of educational background. It is the teacher's responsibility to make the material *comestible* for all manner of people. For those who could not commit to a twenty-hour course or who wanted a first taste, there was a six-hour study day called “Understanding Islam: the Basics.” For those who wanted to go further, there were specialist study days; for those with particular needs, a tailor-made session/day was designed.

A delivery system

Ten-week courses normally ran in parallel so that someone who had a diary clash on a particular week could always catch that session somewhere else. It was wonderful to welcome refugees from one course in another part of London or to see people, who could not make a particular session anywhere because they were out of town all week, arrive for the missing topic in a course that ran in the following term or year! Although courses ran in parallel, each group of people was unique and so each course took on a life of its own and people were encouraged to interrupt with their questions and reflections at any time. For people far from their student days, the idea of sitting on something that troubles them until “question time” at the end is unsettling; better to deal with queries as they naturally arise.

A critical factor in the programme was to widen access as far as possible. After a day's work, people are reluctant to commit to going out and travelling across the city for ten nights, so the courses come to people where they are. For many, many people in society, the idea of going to an education centre in another part of the city would take them completely out of their comfort zone

and so they would not come. Holding courses in local neighbourhoods is convenient for people and empowers those who need affirmation. Through the generosity of the London syndicate, my time and basic expenses were covered, so I did not need to make any charge. Hospitality was offered by religious communities (churches, mosques, synagogues, halls, or meeting rooms) or educational establishments (schools, colleges, chaplaincies etc.) so that there was only the tea/coffee and heating and lighting to cover. In this way, all courses were either free of charge or at a very modest price. For many participants, this really matters and for others a course fee would be a serious deterrent. In this way, several thousand people have come into contact with the programme and attendance at courses remained consistently at more than 100% of the starting number!

To branch into “high-tech” presentations and visual aids has advantages and disadvantages. Where does one find a display screen large enough for a group of thirty to see comfortably? Is the display software compatible with the author’s software? Will the lighting permit projection? Will a PowerPoint presentation put off those not used to them or constrain the flexibility necessary? How is the equipment to be transported when one travels by foot, bus, tube and train over considerable distances? In the case of Birmingham, everything had to go in the saddlebag of a motorcycle! Every teacher and group must find their own answer to these questions. I wanted direct eye contact with everyone in the room. I wanted the infinite flexibility of not working from notes or pre-cast slides. I wanted the immediacy of writing up key words, dates, diagrammes and drawings as they became necessary on a flipchart, black/whiteboard or overhead projector. In this way the interpersonal contact was unbroken by technological (non-)workings and course members habitually commented that the two hours “just flew by”.

What kind of understanding?

I always begin courses with some discussion about my approach to the subject. Some approaches are polemical: finding ways to show up the weaknesses of the religion, to attack and undermine it. Some approaches are apologetic: building up arguments to defend and support the claims of the religion against the claims or challenges of followers of another. Some approaches are developed by critical observers: to subject the religion to supposed scientific analysis with the observer being neutral and unengaged in the process. Some approaches are phenomenological: confining themselves to conveying knowledge of the observable practices, rites, founders and core beliefs of the religion. I always called the courses that I teach “Understanding Islam/Christianity”. But what kind of understanding?

Many years ago, I lodged for one night with an Evangelist from a conservative evangelical tradition – far from my own – in the heart of a large city in a Muslim-majority country where he had lived for years seeking to make

converts. I asked him how he got started when he arrived. His response struck me: he devoted himself to several years of study of the language and culture of the people as well as their Islam. “Unless I can feel the pull of Islam on my own heart” he said, “I cannot reach out to them”. I do not share his calling to seek converts but that “pull on the heart” has stayed with me ever since. If we want to understand another religious tradition then we cannot approach it as though it were a chemical reaction. Rather we have to seek to understand it “through the eyes of those who follow it” and thus to see what it looks like within their perspective, within their world-view. But more than this, a religion is not just a philosophical and ethical system, it is a way of life that trains hearts and leads them into a certain relationship: with God, with the rest of the creation, with fellow human beings and within each individual. It is this “heart knowledge” that needs to be cultivated if we are to “understand” a religion. This I call “empathetic understanding”: feeling within oneself the pull, the attraction, the logic, the cohesion, the inner satisfaction that the religion brings to its followers.

There is a world of difference between understanding something and agreeing with it or following it as a way of life. I can understand in an empathetic way, the sense of privilege that makes some people feel superior, being born to wealth, status, influence and “to rule”, and yet I do not have to agree with that and may indeed pray daily, as do countless Christians, to a God who will “pull down the mighty from their thrones and raise up the lowly”. I can understand why people “turn to drink”, or are attracted by speed, or indeed how parents at the end of their tether lash out and hit a child – without either following any of those ways myself, or wanting to commend them to others or defend them. I am not a *da'i*, one who seeks to invite people to embrace Islam, but I want to promote real understanding within oneself of what Islam is all about. Only then, I argue, do we *understand* Islam.

Whenever anyone comes to look from one religious tradition to another there are pitfalls; one of the biggest of these is double standards. Religious traditions have glorious ideals based on their founding documents, great leaders, outstanding members in history and worked out within ideal societies. They also have some pretty horrid realities of the ways in which followers, including official “religious leaders,” have put them into practice – sometimes distorting them, sometimes stressing elements out of balance with the whole. To see the difference between ideals and realities is crucial to understanding. Indeed, I would argue, we don’t know how sordid some of the realities are until we know how far short of the ideals they fall. Here comes the second crucial point: when we look into another religious tradition there is a great temptation to compare “my wonderful ideals” with “your sordid realities” – and we can see immediately where that leads us.

I recall the first day at the Centre in Selly Oak, the Director’s pep-talk to the new students, a small handful of Christian and Muslim postgraduates:

“Gentlemen” he said, for so I am afraid we all were, “I take it that you all take seriously the Ten Commandments given to Moses.” Muslim and Christian heads nodded in assent. “Then you will understand that the history of Christian-Muslim relations has been bedevilled by people breaking the Commandment that says: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.” The sad reality is that our history has been marked out by deliberate lies to denigrate the image of the other, by partial truths that present a distorted picture and by withholding part of the truth that would fundamentally change the overall appreciation. Sometimes this has been done by innocent ignorance, knowing no better; sometimes by culpable ignorance, not seeking to check things out; and sometimes by deliberate intent. In the easy-to-say phrase, the intention must be to strive for “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth”.

Understanding difference

If Christianity and Islam were “all the same really,” as some people think, then surely the scholars of these two faiths would have worked that out by now! There are fundamental differences between the two faiths and yet “God is One.” There are differences about key understandings of God, God’s relationship with human beings, the human condition and the rôle and nature of key figures like Jesus; just to take a few examples. Part of the self-understanding of Islam is that it comes to correct errors that have crept into the earlier traditions after the pure revelations given to their founders. Thus, Muslims know better the pure message taught by Jesus than do contemporary Christians. Christianity is held to have departed from the teachings of Jesus in several absolutely central doctrines. Well! These are not exactly comfortable words for Christians to hear and yet if we only understand the “nice comfortable bits” then we don’t understand Islam. So there is a critical challenge to understand the whole truth taught by another faith community, even if we fundamentally disagree and find it highly offensive. A similar pattern of “uncomfortable truths” could be drawn out with other religions and for non-religious people also, not just Christianity and Islam.

How then, as a Christian, do I handle these uncomfortable truths? First, in my study and in my teaching, I have to look at them full in the eye and not flinch away; otherwise I am bearing false witness and distorting the whole truth of Islam. Second, as a teacher, I have to support students who encounter these uncomfortable truths for the first time and journey alongside them in their voyage of discovery. Third, if I am to take God seriously and accept that Muslims are another faith community under God alongside me and my Christianity, then I have to be open to hear God speaking to me through Islam, through the Qur’an and Muhammad, and through the lives of Muslims, to remove “any beam that might be in my own eye.” Fourth, I need to go back and examine again my own tradition to clarify it for myself and to accept the challenge of Islam. Fifth, I need to accept that Muslims need to adopt and

stand fast on the teachings of the Qur'an and Muhammad, otherwise Islam is not true to itself. Sixth, I have to struggle to find ways to express my faith in terms that Muslims can understand (Students have often heard me say: "It's not Muslims' fault if Christians cannot explain their doctrines."). Seventh, I must realise with humility that God can also be speaking to Muslims through me and through the Christian message and ways of thinking/acting; understanding another faith, like dialogue, is a two-way process. Finally, I have to accept that there are contradictory truth claims made by both faiths that, at least as far as our human understanding goes to date, we cannot reconcile and so I have to allow God to be God. There comes a point when we have to say, with the Qur'an, "to you your way and to me mine" and to accept that God alone knows the answers to our problems and on the Day of Judgement all things will be made clear.

Knowing and Knowing

In one sense, I can say that I know something when I have reasoned it out. When I have looked at the arguments and counter-arguments, applied clear logic, churned it over with others to see that I am not missing something, subjected it to the test of time and thus come to an "intellectual certainty" that I know something. This is always provisional, of course, as it is time-centred and there may come a time, as Galileo, Copernicus, Newton, Einstein and others showed, when our whole system of knowledge will be turned on its head. We may call this knowing intellectually.

Another kind of knowing is essential in religious understanding. This we may call, knowledge of the heart. I know that my partner loves me, not through the process of reasoning and adducing logical evidence, but rather "I know it in my heart." We can be aware of the "rightness" of something without this being the product of intellectual enquiry: "I feel it in my guts. This is right. Listen to your heart." When someone asks me a question, I can know that I know the answer, without yet knowing what the answer is. We may call this knowing intuitively.

Both kinds of knowledge are required to understand another religion. Take the question posed to a Christian, "Do Muslims worship God?" There is, by definition, only one God, so Muslims either worship God or something other than God; there can't be a "Muslim God" out there somewhere! We can work on this question intellectually, collecting data, comparing theological statements, seeking the empirical evidence of converts or students of both faiths, and thus come to some reasoned position. At the same time, we need to expose our hearts to the experience of Islam, the lives of Muslims, the life of faith in practice, and come to an intuitive knowing about the presence or absence of God in the lives of others. Sometimes the head goes before the heart: "I can see all the arguments but I just can't accept it." Sometimes the heart goes before the head: "I know that it's true but I just can't work out how

or why.” As a Christian student of Islam, I need to be open, and encourage others to be open, to know, in both senses, the light and goodness of the grace of God at work in all human beings – in this case Muslims – and then to ask whether this action of the grace of God is in and through their religion or in spite of it.

Understanding Islam

When it comes to understanding any religion, even within its own terms, from within, we have to ask where to begin and into what kind of a framework do we put the information and experiences that we gather.

Many text books on Islam will begin with the “Five Pillars” and thus reduce Islam to a set of practices. Many Muslims begin in the same place. Or it may be that people begin with the seventh century, a prophet called Muhammad and a scripture called the Qur’an. This looks like a good starting point, until we realise that Muslims never say that Muhammad is the only prophet sent by God or the Qur’an the only scripture. Islam always refers to Muhammad as the last and the seal of the line of prophets and to the Qur’an as the last and final revelation sent to the earth. If something is the “last” of its kind, then there must have been others that went before or else the “last” makes no sense. Islam traces its chain of prophethood and revelation back to the first human beings, Adam and Eve, with Adam being the first prophet and them being the first human beings that needed and received revelation from God so that they could live a truly human life in obedience to the ethical will of God. Thus there is one human family, according to Islam, and all human beings are born into the same condition, all need the revelation from God that has been sent many times throughout history to many prophets; the Qur’an and Muhammad being the last and definitive examples in those chains.

Islam speaks of itself as being the natural order of things (*din al-fitra*). Its message and guidance are applicable to every human being. To understand Islam is to understand that its message and guidance are not the property of a group of people called “Muslims,” the followers of a prophet called Muhammad. Every human being is the rightful owner and recipient of the message. This changes crucially how one understands Islam and how it’s taught. To understand Islam is to move it from “guidance for those people over there” to “guidance that should speak to me too, that I can receive, weigh and reflect upon”. Whether I accept it or not is a different question and must not be confused; after all, we all know that some things are good for us even if we don’t do them! For me, this is a crucial way of evaluating whether I am teaching effectively about Islam or not. If people say, “I can make no sense of this” or “It does not speak to me at all,” then either I am not teaching effectively or what I am teaching about is not real Islam but maybe a cultural wrapper that is mistaken for Islam. Real understanding of real Islam should mean that it finds a reverberation in the heart of every human being, whether an

individual only partly agrees or not and independently of whether or not the guidance is put into practice. An example might make this clearer.

In every course and talk someone asks a question about *hijab* – by which they mean “women’s dress”. Now I could launch into a description of different forms of dress, measure out in square centimetres how much skin is to be covered/exposed or discuss variations between different groups. At best, this would give some knowledge of “why those funny women over there wear those funny clothes” – at worst, it might reinforce all kinds of stereotypes. But no real understanding has been brought about. If instead I begin by talking about a sense of modesty, a respect for my own body, ennobling the human condition and start from the principal Qur’anic verse that addresses first the *men* and tells them to lower their gaze and guard their modesty (the next verse speaks to the *women* and uses the same formula of words), then I have begun to move the understanding from “what they wear” to “what is in the human heart”. Then if we move on to talk about separating different spheres in our lives: an intimate sphere (Would not a married couple close the bedroom door to screen themselves from the family before they make love? That door is a *hijab*.), a personal/family sphere (Let’s draw the curtains, then we can shut out the world and just be family alone! Those curtains are *hijab*.), and a public sphere (Do you go shopping in slippers and pyjamas or put on “sensible clothes” to go out in public? Those sensible clothes are *hijab*). By approaching it in this way, every human being in the group has begun to feel both intuitively and intellectually that there is some guidance here applicable to all humankind; it reverberates in our hearts. In this way, we can all learn something *from* Islam as well as *about* Islam, without necessarily agreeing with everything that Islam has to say or becoming a Muslim. From this basis, we can begin to discuss styles of dress and get out our tape measures! (To hear more about this approach to *hijab* see the DVD on this website “The Spirit of Hijab”)

What kind of Muslims and Islam?

If I were to say that “all Christians, all over the world believe and practise Christianity in the same way” we would be blown away by the gales of laughter. The same diversity is there within all the world’s major faiths – including Islam. One of our problems today is living with legitimate diversity instead of wanting to say that “we” or “you” must all and always be the same. Islam has always had essential beliefs – the oneness of God and the Prophethood of Muhammad – that unite it but there has been wide diversity of practice from the earliest years after the death of Muhammad onwards. One of the critical issues is how to keep the balance between the essential beliefs and the diversity, and how to show that in one’s teaching. Even more important is to identify what is believed and practised by a (huge) majority and the eccentric ideas of those on the (extreme) fringes. Teaching accurately and sensitively the legitimate diversity of Islamic faith and practice is part of my job; it is not for me to attempt to solve the questions about which Muslims disagree.

Like in every other community, there are “observant Muslims” and “disobedient” ones – this is to assume that we have taken on board the previous point. There are things that Muslims do that are quite unjustifiable according to Islamic teaching but they are still a reality! The fact that “I know a Muslim who drinks alcohol” is a reality but it does not mean that this can be justified according to Islamic law. There are those Muslims who “dress the part” but don’t live the inner life and there are others who live the inner life strongly but are unrecognisable in the street. There are those who bawl and shout the rhetoric of Islam but do not follow its guidance in the way that they conduct their lives. In our teaching, we have to face these realities and steer a way between them to seek out “what Islam says” – in its diversity.

Building a just society

Throughout human history, there have been people who have attempted to put their religious teachings into practice in this world. Sometimes these have led to good things like the creation of a caring state, universal free education, a legal system, respect for individual rights and so on; no religion has a monopoly on these things. At other times, people have taken the teaching to a higher level that challenges the assumptions of society, where a majority of the people, often led by those with most to lose, become uncomfortable and oppose them – we can think of the anti-slavery campaigns, the civil rights movements and the attempts at utopian republics, by way of examples. The Abrahamic religions are not “other worldly” but call for the Kingdom of God, that is, for human beings, human society and all creation to live according to the guidance of God, however they call it, to be established on the earth. Religious people and religious systems can be uncomfortable to have around!

The Qur’an makes central both establishing the prayers and bringing our economic lives under God’s guidance. To teach about or try to understand Islam is to accept that we are going to be challenged and made to feel uncomfortable by a call for justice that we would rather not hear; maybe also a call that we do not recognise as being just. Our established ways of doing things will be brought into question and we will be made to consider things from another perspective. We have to live with the fact too that there are many corrupt Muslim-majority societies around the world and many rich and powerful Muslims who have good reason to fear the Day of Judgement when they will be held to account. Islam, like Communism and Christianity, wants to say “best ideas never tried out in practice” when it looks at much of its history – of course, like the rest of us, Muslims cannot escape the mess that people have made of their ideals in reality.

Islamic ideals on politics, economics, a social system, education, care for the elderly and vulnerable, the circulation of wealth, care for the environment, the acceptable use of legitimate force and how to share a world with others with

whom we disagree are all challenging subjects for honest reflection. (To read more about these teachings in Islam see the articles on this website: *Islamic social values* and *Christians and Muslims towards the future*.)

At the heart of the Islamic ethical system stands justice and there is no escaping its call, as the Qur'an says, "Do justice even if it goes against yourself". Looking at some of these topics in the Understanding Islam courses have been amongst the most challenging and require direct but sensitive handling. Justice does not wear labels, there is no such thing as Muslim or Christian justice, therefore we need to apply our rational faculties to test out whether something is in fact just, if so, it should surely appeal to all of us. In response to the highly charged question of accommodating certain aspects of Shari'a law within the British legal system, we might do well to begin from "thanks be to God for the huge swathes of Shari'a that we already find there" – for wherever we find justice, there we find the Shari'a: the path of guidance on living a just and ethical life drawn from the Qur'an and the customary practice of Muhammad.

Who attends courses?

People often ask, who comes to an Understanding Islam course? The only honest answer is, "all manner of people!" Some people come because of their work: they have Muslim fellow-workers, clients, pupils, employees or customers. Some are public servants charged with serving all citizens, including Muslim citizens. Some have Muslim friends, neighbours or acquaintances. Some people have realised that one cannot understand the news on any day of the year without an understanding of Islam and Muslims in contemporary society and in history. Some come saying openly "it can't be as bad as the media portray" and others "I can't stand Muslims, tell me why"; both are cries for a more informed perspective on Islam and Muslims. A surprising number of people have personal grounds for coming along: their son or daughter has become a Muslim or is going out with one, they have a partner who is a Muslim but may not be practising, some have become Muslims but can't find a style of teaching that enables them to question and understand. Some are just interested in things religious and may or may not be a follower of a particular religion themselves. For some it is a social and stimulating alternative to the television.

Quite a number of Muslims come along to courses, so that is worth exploring. Why would Muslims choose to attend a course on Understanding Islam taught by a Christian? Well maybe, just for that reason! "Let's go and see what this Christian is saying" – many actually become regular attendees through this approach. During the London years it became the norm that there would be some Muslims in every course: maybe brought along by friends or with a partner, maybe they just saw the course advertised, maybe because the course was jointly-hosted by a Muslim group or organisation and maybe because they

were asked to attend by their elders to learn how this person talks about Islam and handles questions in a British non-mosque context. It is an odd situation when a Christian is asked by Muslims to teach about Islam and, not surprisingly, I prayed regularly for my own redundancy, for the day when there would be an abundance of Muslims equipped to do this work.

In conversation with Muslim leaders about the courses, they would often say that “we never heard anyone talk about Islam this way before”. This is an important statement to tease out. It certainly was not that I was so learned about Islam or that I am particularly gifted. Every teacher knows that one has to formulate the material in a way that the students can grasp and understand. All that I was doing was casting my limited knowledge of Islam into a framework that Western-educated people can appreciate and understand. My response was to say that the reason why this is important is that young Muslims growing up and being educated in Britain think, learn and understand in just the same way as everyone else with the same educational background; there is a huge challenge to Muslim teachers here to teach their own people about Islam in a way that fits their educational framework.

Thanks for this course on Islam; I learnt so much about my own Christianity by doing it!

How many times have I heard this comment? It was a habitual part of the course by about the eighth week when people approached me during the tea break. Part of any good teacher’s rôle is accompaniment, journeying alongside students and facilitating their reflection and learning. Course members who are not Muslims but follow another way of life are bound to reflect on what they learn and compare it to their own tradition. Often they are first struck by similarities; then come the differences, small and great. Through a process of reflection people come to ask: “Are the Gospels like the Qur’an?” or “Is Jesus a prophet like Muhammad?” By being educated in both theological traditions, I can help to draw comparative models that can promote learning: “To appreciate the centrality of the Qur’an in the Islamic system, one needs to liken it to the place of Jesus in Christianity and not to the Gospels.” This process of reflection allows people to come to an assessment of how critical differences might be: Is the identity of the son that Abraham was told to sacrifice as critically important to the Christian tradition as whether or not Jesus died on the cross and rose to resurrection life? People learn a lot by seeing their religion in the mirror of another.

Does that go for Understanding Christianity too?

Many are the times that I have been asked by Christians, “Are there Muslims out there learning about our religion too?” The obvious answer is to say far fewer than there are Christians who have followed the Understanding Islam programmes. Fortunately, the Christian ethic is in no way based on reciprocity

“treat other people the way that they treat you”) but rather on taking the initiative and setting an example that we hope others will follow (“do unto others as you would have them do unto you”). Some Christian scholars have made advances in developing ways to speak to Muslims about Christianity, mainly at the university level and mostly in Turkey (see the articles by my colleagues Christian Troll, Thomas Michel and Felix Körner in *Christian lives given to the study of Islam*, NY: Fordham University Press, 2012)

During my five years in London, I received some requests to deliver a course, a study day or some talks to help Muslims understand Christianity. This is not easy for Muslims as they start with a set of presuppositions about the authentic Christianity that was taught by Jesus, which was in essence like Islam and all the other revelations from God. The unfortunate fact, in Muslim eyes, is that Christians, over the centuries, have moved away from, lost, forgotten or deliberately changed the essential teaching of Jesus. The Qur’an says that Jesus received a revealed scripture from God called the *Injil*, like the Qur’an, but Christians have, at least partially, lost it. Similarly, Jesus was a human prophet like Muhammad but Christians have elevated him to divine status. If one approaches Christianity within this framework, then it is hard to understand what it is that Christians actually believe without having one’s prejudices reinforced and proved right: the Christians do not have a directly revealed scripture sent down from heaven like the Qur’an on which to stand; what then is the bedrock of their religion?

For Muslims to begin to understand Christianity, Christians need to find a way of expressing the framework of their faith so that Muslims can see that Christianity operates on a quite different framework to that of Islam. Only by shifting the framework or paradigm can Muslims begin to understand. Not only does this require pedagogical imagination on the part of the Christian teacher but it also requires courage as Christianity through Christian eyes is even further from Islam than Muslim presuppositions presume it to be!

A glimpse of a way forward?

Some years ago, I served on a working party with a number of Muslim and Christian colleagues. One of the Muslims made the point repeatedly that: “You (Christians) will get the kind of Islam and Muslims in Britain in the future that you (Christians) invest in now.” There is a huge challenge here. In a multi-faith, multi-cultural society like twenty-first century Britain, in the midst of a world of instantaneous communication, we are all involved in building our shared future. If we allow Islam and Muslims to be demonised, or to be manipulated by the forces – Muslim or not – of money, ignorance, corruption or fear of the unknown; if we allow ignorance of Islam to prevail amongst young British Muslims and wider society, or concentrate only on our own privileged survival in the future, then we could be in for some rocky decades in this country.

Does the methodology and experience of the Understanding Islam programme have something to contribute to the way forward? Are there lessons that can be applied in other areas? Where are the trained people to implement our shared visions? Where is the funding to support the work? Imagine a team of people, both Muslims and Christians, who are learned in their own and the other religion, who could work together to present and clarify understandings between these two great religions. Imagine how that model could be replicated with other faiths and non-religious codes of living. Imagine a truly harmonious society in twenty-first century multi-everything Britain.

Books to which reference was made:

C.T.R. Hewer, *Understanding Islam: the first ten steps*, London: SCM Press, 2006

Christian W. Troll SJ and C.T.R. Hewer, *Christian lives given to the study of Islam*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2012