

# EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

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## Evangelical Review of Theology

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obedience of faith*

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## Editorial

Christian Mission and the Muslim Da'wah 'to call men into the path of Allah' affirm that both religions are missionary faiths, each with long memories of centuries of conflict between them.

In today's global context the conflicts continue unabated, though Christians, and to some degree Muslims, are actively engaged in dialogue to reduce misunderstanding, clarify issues and work for mutual respect without loss of integrity or commitment to mission. Minority and majority situations have a direct bearing on the success and failure of such dialogues. This issue of ERT seeks to reflect the complexity of our missiological task.

Two issues are central, one cultural and the other theological. Articles and personal stories used highlight the cultural gaps and the failure of both church and mosque to bridge them. The theological issues are not adequately dealt with in this number; the Asia Theological Association is publishing a major compendium on these issues later this year. However one observation needs to be made. From the perspective of Christian Mission our understanding of the depth of human sinfulness and action can be met only by God's gracious initiative in his saving act in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Muslim rarely uses the word salvation for he sees no need of God's unique and final intervention. Islam is *din al-fitrah*—natural religion. The Muslim needs only *hidayah*—divine guidance to know and live in obedience to the will of Allah.

The gospel is indeed good news to all alike—Christian and Muslim, but those who proclaim the Cross must be prepared to live by it. p. 100

## Christian perceptions of Islam: Threat, Challenge or Misunderstood Ally?

Colin Chapman

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A Malaysian Christian friend has no difficulty in describing how he perceives Islam: 'If you put a frog into boiling water it will immediately jump out; but if you put it into cold water and gradually heat the water to boiling point, the frog *won't* jump out—and will soon be

dead. Isn't it obvious what the government is trying to do with its programme of gradual Islamization? Every small change in the law in an Islamic direction makes us Christians feel as if the temperature is being increased.'

Visitors to East Africa cannot help noticing the smart new mosques springing up along the main roads. Then they hear Christians talking about the plans of Muslims to build mosques at regular intervals along the highways between Lagos and Mombasa, Cape Town and Cairo. The possession of land, they are told, is particularly important for Muslims, who see the building of mosques as 'claiming land for Allah'.

Christians and other minorities in Pakistan feel extremely vulnerable because of the recent cases involving 'the blasphemy laws'. Although the charges against 14-year-old Salamat Masih and his uncle have been dismissed, they have had to leave the country for their own safety.

When Christians in Europe hear reports like these, they often conclude that the word 'challenge' is too mild, and start speaking of Islam as a 'threat'. They see the Muslim community around them increasing in size and influence, and sense that some (or is it many?) Muslims must have their own vision of 'winning the world for Islam'. What then are they to make of Christian leaders who consistently adopt a 'softly, softly' approach, who scold fellow Christians for misrepresenting Islam and see it rather as an ally, and who appear to fall over backwards to accommodate Muslim demands?

Amid this bewildering variety of [p. 101](#) Christian response to Islam in different parts of the world, is it possible to develop an approach which avoids *both* the paranoia and the conspiracy theories, which demonize Islam and make it into 'the Great Enemy', *and* the naivety which doesn't seem to understand the fundamental values of Islam and their many contemporary expressions, or to see what is actually happening in the world around us?

If it is worth trying to walk this difficult tight-rope, and if CMS has a contribution to make, it will be partly because of its history of engagement with the world of Islam in the Middle East, Africa and Asia for nearly 200 years and partly because of its present role in maintaining links between Christians living alongside Muslims in different parts of the world.

This cumulative experience may suggest five possible clues for charting this kind of 'middle way'.

## **1. A GLOBAL VIEW**

It is always dangerous to make generalizations on the basis of experience in only *one* context in which Christians are engaging with Muslims. In parts of Africa, for example, Christians and Muslims have lived peacefully side by side for many years, with members of both faith communities in the same family. Christians in the Middle East, on the other hand, feel as if they have lived as second-class citizens under Muslim rule for almost 1,400 years.

My own sympathy for Arab Christians, however, has had to be balanced by my awareness of the vulnerability of Muslims in Britain today. On one of my visits with theological students to a mosque in Bristol, our Muslim host pointed to the wire grills protecting all the windows and said, 'We greatly appreciate your visits. At the very least they may mean one less stone thrown through our windows!'

Christian students from northern Nigeria who study Islam at the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations in Selly Oak, soon realize that there have been many periods in history when the two faith communities have lived together peacefully. And when they observe Muslim-Christian relations in Birmingham, they begin to

understand that many of the special factors which have created tension in Nigeria do not exist in every other country.

Philip Lewis, the Inter-Faith Advisor in the Diocese of Bradford, enjoys the respect and confidence of both Christians and Muslims in the city. His recent book, *Islamic Britain: Religion, Politics and Identity among British Muslims*, has been warmly recommended by reviewers of both faiths. Where he has been able to build bridges between the two communities, it is partly because he has lived and worked in Pakistan, the country from which the majority of the Muslim community in Bradford have come.

Similarly, John Ray, another returned CMS mission partner, is able to bring his long experience of education in Muslim Kashmir to his involvement in schools in inner-city Birmingham. Muslim school governors in Birmingham know very well that his values are not formed by the p. 102 secular ‘multi-culturalism’ of Britain, and sometimes they have to answer questions of the following kind which he feels obliged to ask: ‘Are governments in Muslim countries prepared to give the same rights to minorities that you are demanding in this country?’

What we are talking about here is the ability to understand the special dynamic which affects relationships between the two communities in *our own* situation, and at the same time to look over the garden wall and recognize the enormous diversity in *other* situations where Muslims and Christians live together. We need the humility to be challenged and informed by the experience of the Body of Christ in other parts of the world.

## 2. THE STUDY OF ISLAM

A recent doctoral thesis by Michael Shelley, an American Lutheran, describes Temple Gairdner of Cairo as ‘a scholar-missionary to Islam’, and explains, among other things, how a period of sabbatical study under Duncan Black Macdonald, an Old Testament and Islamic scholar, at Hartford Seminary in the USA profoundly affected Gairdner’s approach to Muslims.

Gairdner himself spoke of this whole experience as ‘my grand transformation drama’. Macdonald described what happened in these words. ‘When Temple Gairdner came to me to study Islam, he came seeking knock-down arguments against Muslims. I never gave him such, but he went away understanding the genius of Islam and able to enter into the minds of Muslims. He had passed from controversy to persuasion.’

If the word ‘study’ sounds very dry and academic, it is good to be reminded that Constance Padwick’s classic, *Muslim Devotions*, was a reflection on prayer manuals in common use all over the Muslim world. ‘... a stranger desiring not to remain a stranger,’ she explained in her Introduction, ‘could best feel the pulsing life of religion through a study of the devotions actually in use.’

Bill Musk has introduced a new generation of students to ‘folk Islam’ through his book *The Unseen Face of Islam* in a way that none of the traditional text-books about ‘ideal Islam’ has ever attempted to do. His gift for popular writing has been further demonstrated in *Passionate Believing: The ‘Fundamentalist’ Face of Islam*.

The discipline of studying Islam—in whatever way and at whatever level—should enable us to listen to Muslims more attentively. Instead of trying to tell Muslims what they believe, we will be allowing *them* to define their faith for us. We ought to be in a better position to recognize where the behaviour of some Muslims is inconsistent with the ideals of Islam. As a result, we may show greater sensitivity in the way we try to express our beliefs about Jesus, and we may be saved from the snare of comparing the worst in Islam with the best in Christianity and of judging Muslims of the past by the moral standards of our own times.

The study of Islam will also remind us of the rich diversity within Islam and discourage us from making those easy generalizations about [p. 103](#) Islamic belief and practice. We will have to recognize that the more 'liberal' approach of Indian Islam, which fights to keep India a secular state, is probably just as legitimate a strand within Islam as the more 'fundamentalist' tradition of the Muslim Brotherhood or the spiritual disciplines of the Sufis.

### 3. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES

A recent booklet produced by an evangelical mission includes the following in a list of dos and don'ts concerning witness to Muslims: 'Avoid politics. Politics and religion are closely linked in Islam.' My own experience makes me suspect, however, that there cannot be many countries in the world where it is possible for Christians to avoid talking to Muslims about politics.

In Nigeria, for example, it was only a united protest from all the churches in 1986 which eventually compelled the government to withdraw its secret application for the country to become a member of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which links together almost all countries with Muslim majorities.

Partnership with the churches in the Sudan has involved CMS in advocacy, both public and private, at Westminster and in New York. While it is a gross over-simplification to see Sudan's civil war as a conflict between Islam and Christianity, it cannot be denied that the religious question is *part* of the equation. Christians in southern Sudan are made to feel that they stand as an obstacle to the Islamization of Africa.

The conflict in Bosnia is probably even more complex than that of the Sudan. In Bosnia we are dealing with the aspirations of several different ethnic groups, with the legacy of 400 years of history, and with tensions between Muslims, Catholic Christians and Orthodox Christians. However, the perception of Bosnian Muslims is that they have been betrayed by the rest of the world, and Muslims in Birmingham fear that what has happened in Bosnia will be repeated in Britain before long.

In such a situation it has been a matter of concern to some that Christian leaders in the rest of Europe have spoken so little about Bosnia, and that what they have said has been so mild.

One of the most sensitive areas of debate in Britain today is the question of state-funded Muslim schools. If Anglicans, Catholics and Jews can have schools within the state system, it is said, then why not Muslims as well? Opponents argue that state-funded Muslim schools are not wanted by the majority of the Muslims themselves and that, if they did exist, they would simply complete the ghetto-ization of the Muslim community.

In case we begin to feel, however, that Muslims and Christians are bound to be in constant conflict over political and social issues, we need to be reminded of situations in which they have been able to join hands in their support of particular causes.

Muslims and Christians have been able to work side by side in South Africa in their opposition to apartheid. Also, while Palestinian Christians can hardly identify with the [p. 104](#) more extreme Muslim expressions of Palestinian nationalism, they can generally stand shoulder to shoulder with moderate Muslims in their support of the Palestinian cause.

Perhaps we could even go one step further and suggest that Muslims and Christians should recognize that *both* communities face similar problems when they find themselves in a minority situation. Between one-quarter and one-third of all Muslims live in countries where they are a minority. What then would happen if, instead of trying to score debating

points against each other, we were to discuss openly our shared dilemmas of minority status?

The problem for some Christians is that they find it difficult to come to terms with the political face of Islam. If all they know is their own situation and if they have not attempted to study Islam, then they will not understand the motives which drive some (or, once again, is it many?) Muslims.

For those who *do* understand the logic of the *Hijra* (the migration from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD) and the status of Muhammad as *both* prophet *and* statesman, and who find themselves inevitably being drawn into political and social issues, the problem is to see what justice demands in any particular situation and to find that delicate balance between firmness and gentleness.

All of us, however, will need to understand why Lesslie Newbigin and others see Islam's claim to 'public truth' and its holistic vision for the whole community as a rebuke to all Christians who attempt to privatize their faith by evading political and social issues.

#### 4. DIALOGUE AND MISSION

Michael Nazir-Ali has spoken frequently of the absurdity of trying to drive a wedge between 'dialogue' and 'mission', and one of his Newsletters on this subject has been included in his recent volume appropriately titled *Mission and Dialogue: Proclaiming the Gospel Afresh in Every Age*.

Unfortunately, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that Christians on different wings of the churches find difficulty in integrating the two. In 1991, for example, the Islam in Europe Committee of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) produced a report entitled *The Presence of Muslims in Europe and the Theological Training of Pastoral Workers*, which calls for a 'fundamental rethinking of missiology' and for 'a theology with a view to dialogue and resulting from dialogue'.

In spelling out the aims of training for pastoral workers, the report recognizes that Islam and Christianity are both 'missionary' religions, and pleads for openness on the part of Christians, abandoning superiority and prejudice, taking risks, unlearning and relearning, transforming one's relationship to one's neighbour and opening up one's view of the world. However, there is no suggestion that pastoral workers might need to be trained to bear witness to their experience of Christ. All the emphasis is on ways in which Christians need to be changed, and nothing is said about the possibility that Christians might have something to share with Muslims.

I have often suspected that one of the most searching tests of our [p. 105](#) approach to Islam and Muslims is to be found in the way we pray. Will western Christians, who struggle not only with the guilt of their colonial past but also with a massive loss of confidence in the gospel, ever be willing to pray as the first Christians in Jerusalem prayed when their backs were against the wall, and ask for the gift of boldness, confidence, freedom of speech, effective communication (*parresia*; [Acts 4:23–31](#))?

#### 5. CONFIDENCE IN THE GOSPEL

Our willingness to pray the prayer of the early church may depend upon our confidence in the message about the crucified, risen and ascended Jesus. For no amount of global awareness of Islam, no amount of study, no amount of engagement with political and social issues, even with the most perfect balance between mission and dialogue, will forward the cause of Christ if Christians are—or appear to be—apologetic about the gospel.

We certainly have much about which to be ashamed in the ways in which we have related to the House of Islam in the past. But something must have gone seriously wrong if our silence, and in some cases our embarrassment, seem to extend to the heart of the Christian message itself.

The Secretary of a Christian agency in a certain European country recently reported that his organization had distributed blankets and Qur'ans to Bosnian Muslim refugees. When asked why the agency had not given portions of Scripture for distribution, he replied, 'But that would have been "mission".'

A group of church leaders in a certain Middle Eastern country had an audience recently with a well-known Muslim political leader and gave him a presentation copy of the Qur'an. To their surprise he rebuked them with the words, 'Why didn't you give me a copy of *your* Scriptures?'

## CONCLUSION

Perhaps the clearest guidance that we have had in recent years about the 'middle way' which we have been seeking has come from Kenneth Cragg. For many he has been a consistent model of each one of the five clues which we have been exploring. In his first book *The Call of the Minaret*, written in 1956, he revealed some of the motives that have inspired him through more than five decades of engagement with Islam:

If Christ is what Christ is, he must be uttered. If Islam is what Islam is, that 'must' is irresistible. Wherever there is misconception, witness must penetrate; wherever there is the obscuring of the beauty of the Cross, it must be unveiled; wherever persons have missed God in Christ, he must be brought to them again ... In such a situation as Islam presents, the Church has no option but to present Christ.

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# Does the Church Make it Difficult for Muslim Enquirers?

John D.C. Anderson

*Reprinted with permission*

'Sarah saw (Ishmael) mocking'—[Gen. 21:9](#)

'God heard the boy crying'—[Gen. 21:17](#)

One saw Ishmael as a rival, a competitor, an enemy. The other saw a boy in need, crying for water, alone in the desert. Sadly, it is the first of these two ways of looking at Ishmael which epitomizes the Christian church's attitude to the sons of Ishmael, the Arabs, and in particular the spiritual followers of Arabia's most famous son, Muhammad.