

Theological Issues in Christian-Muslim Dialogue

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Abstract

An initial analysis of the theological aspects of Christian-Muslim relations. After setting the historical scene, the following theological issues are briefly explored: consequences of two faiths worshipping God, prophethood of Muhammed, status of the Qur'an, Jesus as "Son of God", a Qur'anic Christology, "People of the Book" vs. "People of the Incarnate Revelation", the divine/human relationship in heaven, salvation and original sin, free-will and predeterminism, unicity of God vs. Trinity, Unitarians as "true Christians", death and resurrection vs. "undead ascension", and has the magisterium of the Church distorted the true message of Jesus? Three dimensions of the issues are covered: Content: what are the theological issues? Method: how do we handle the issues? Consequences: what difference might that make for Christian theological reflection? The challenge is to develop a methodology that moves beyond polemic or apologetics, that recognises the limitations of understanding and that returns theological discourse to the realm of faith and accountability before God.

Keywords

Christianity, Islam, Muslim, Dialogue, Theology

Introduction

We approach the topic with three categories in mind throughout the paper:

- 1 Content, what are the theological issues?
- 2 Method, how do we handle them?
- 3 Consequences, what difference might that make for Christian theological reflection?

Setting the scene

The most remarkable thing about *Nostra Aetate* is that it exists at all.¹ Its particularity can be seen in the relatively tiny number of footnotes cross-referencing it to earlier magisterial documents, precisely because it was a departure from the customary silence or polemics as regards other faiths. The theme of Christian-Muslim relations was one to which the late pope returned, especially during his foreign travels.² Sterling teaching, research and publication was done by the Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islam.³ It was the director of this Institute who prepared the helpful *Guidelines for Dialogue* on behalf of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.⁴

The major contribution of *Nostra Aetate* was to acknowledge explicitly that Muslims worship God, “who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth”.⁵ This clarifies with the highest authority of the Catholic magisterium, a question that is still disputed in both Evangelical and continental Protestant writings, although clearly indicated by the Lambeth Conference of 1988.⁶ Before becoming too enthusiastic in the light of *Nostra Aetate*, it is worth noting the comment from Ayoub,

¹ The story of its development is well told in Vorgrimler, H. (ed), *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Freiburg: Herder & Herder, 1968, vol. III, p. 1–154.

² A most helpful compendium has been produced by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Gioia, F. (ed), *Interreligious Dialogue: the official teaching of the Catholic Church (1963–1995)*, Boston: Pauline, 1997. A comprehensive appraisal of developments in the second half of the twentieth century from Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant perspectives can be found in: Waardenburg, J.J. (ed.), *Islam and Christianity: mutual perceptions since the mid-20th century*, Leuven: Peeters, 1998, (see especially Christian Troll’s chapter, “Changing Catholic views of Islam”, pp. 19–78). Troll has a further article on “Catholic teachings on Interreligious dialogue: analysis of some recent official documents, with special reference to Christian-Muslim relations” in Waardenburg, J.J. (ed), *Muslim-Christian perceptions of dialogue today*, Leuven: Peeters, 2000, pp. 233–275. For one Muslim appraisal of elements of ambiguity in the late pope’s speeches and writing on Islam, see Mahmoud Ayoub’s essay “Pope John Paul II on Islam” in Omar, I. A. (ed), *A Muslim view of Christianity: Essays on dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub*, New York: Orbis, 2007, p. 232–245. This newly published volume draws together 16 essays on the theme by one of the best informed and committed Muslim contributors to the theological dialogue with Christianity. For a wider appraisal, see Sherwin, B.L. and H. Kashimow (eds), *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*, New York: Orbis, 1999.

³ Particular attention is drawn to the annual series of *Islamochristiana*, from 1975 onwards, carrying important articles, mainly in French and English.

⁴ Borrmans, M., *Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims*, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, New York: Paulist, 1990 (original French edition 1981).

⁵ N.A. para. 7.

⁶ [Followers of these three faiths] “share a mission to the world that God’s name may be hallowed. . . Each will recall the other to God, to trust him more fully and obey him more profoundly.” ‘Jews, Christians and Muslims: the Way of Dialogue’, para. 27, in *The Truth Shall Make You Free: The Lambeth Conference, 1988: The Reports, Resolutions, and Pastoral Letters from the Bishops*, London: Church House Publishing, 1988, p. 305. When asked for grounds to suggest that Muslims and Christians worship God, I point to three indicators: a. That there are some 14 million Arabic mother-tongue Christians in the world,

The council, however, did not declare acceptance of Islam as a theological belief system but only an end to hostility toward Muslims and an appreciation of Muslim piety. All that the council did, therefore, was open the door for Muslim-Catholic dialogue in an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance. This new approach, however, still calls for the evangelisation of Muslims, as the pope's attitude towards Islam indicates. But the question remains, Is this openness true dialogue, or could it be simply condescending tolerance aimed at facilitating evangelization?⁷

In the list of Muslim piety to be respected, "upright life and worship [of] God, especially by way of prayer, alms-deeds and fasting",⁸ no mention is made of the great annual pilgrimage of the Hajj, in which the willingness to submit all to the will of God by both Abraham and his son, according to the Qur'an,⁹ an acknowledgement of which ought to be a point of linkage between the two faiths.¹⁰ Similarly, nothing has been said of the status of Muhammad as Prophet, according to Dan Madigan SJ, "without doubt the most avoided question in Muslim-Christian relations"¹¹ or of the status of the Qur'an as a revelation from God.¹²

who also refer to God as Allah and have lived alongside Muslims since the time of Muhammad, therefore presumably knowing the reality of what both communities mean by Allah; b. That many converts from Islam to Christianity bear witness that they used to worship God but now have come to a different relationship with God through their faith in Christ; c. That a survey of the conceptual understanding of God in both traditions carries so much that is common. Christians are of course aware that Jews also worship God, whilst conceiving of God in fundamentally different ways to Christians; the same argument is thus extended to include Muslims.

⁷ Ayoub, op. cit., p. 240.

⁸ N.A., para. 7

⁹ Q. 37: 103–113. The Qur'anic account does not explicitly name the son involved but overwhelming Muslim tradition has identified him as Ishmael. A particularity of this account is that Ishmael is aware of Abraham's intention and is himself commanded by God to submit his life in sacrifice; thus it is a double test of obedience by both father and son, both of whom are revered as Prophets according to Islam.

¹⁰ It is noteworthy that the practice has developed amongst Christians of sending greetings to Muslims on the occasion of one of their great festivals, or 'Ids, but the custom has been to do so at 'Id al-Fitr, at the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, rather than at 'Id al-Adha, the festival that immediately follows the Hajj and thus commemorates the willingness to submit all to the will of God, which might be thought to be the natural occasion if this point of linkage was to be honoured and respected.

¹¹ Madigan, D., "Jesus and Muhammad: the sufficiency of prophecy" in Igrave, M. (ed), *Bearing the Word: Prophecy in Biblical and Qur'anic Perspective*, London: Church House Publishing, 2005, p. 90–99. This work is the record of proceedings at the third "Building Bridges" Seminar under the auspices of the Archbishop of Canterbury; the other two volumes published to date are also worthy of attention: Igrave, M. (ed), *The Road Ahead: a Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, London: Church House Publishing, 2002, and Igrave, M. (ed), *Scriptures in Dialogue: Christians and Muslims studying the Bible and the Qur'an together*, London: Church House Publishing, 2004.

¹² See the valuable summary given by the German theologian and scholar of Islam, Christian Troll SJ, in his *Muslims ask, Christians answer*, Gujarat: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash,

Theological issues

I do not propose to answer the questions thus far noted, which still occupy scholars of much greater moment than me, but to contribute in short to these three themes. It seems to me that once we accept that Muslims are worshipping God, then we must accept that this is a two-way relationship in which God is involved in the lives and piety of Muslims. There is one line of interpretation of a verse of the Qur'an,¹³ that would indicate that, in this case Jews and Christians, people might truly be worshipping God but that that worship will not be accepted from them as they do not worship God in accordance with the latest available and most certain guidance, but this would be a difficult position to adopt in Christian theology, especially as it is now widely accepted that the covenant with the Jews is still valid and that they do indeed worship God and that such worship pleases God. If it is accepted then that Muslims are worshipping God, the one and only God that I as a Christian also worship, then I cannot say that I am the faithful servant of God and ignore what God is doing in and through another faith community. I am required to take God seriously, and thus to take seriously the message and lived faith of God's Muslim children. For me this means taking seriously what God might be saying to me *as a Christian* in and through the Qur'an, Muhammad and the lived out faith of Muslims. The dialogue with Muslims is an act of faith before God and not just a piece of intellectual or sociological wrangling.

Muslims believe that Muhammad is the Last and the Seal of a chain of Prophets that goes back through such biblical figures as Jesus, Moses and Abraham to Adam, the first Prophet sent by God to humankind.¹⁴ Like all the Prophets, he was infallible and

2005 (original German ed. *Muslime fragen, Christen antworten*, Regensburg: Topos, 2003), Ch. 4. Troll draws attention in his survey to the work of the French Christian-Muslim research group (GRIC: Groupe de Recherche Islamo-Chrétien, founded in 1977) and in particular to the contribution of the French Dominican New Testament scholar, Claude Geffré, who spoke of the Qur'an as "a word of God, genuine but different. . ." from the Word of God in Jesus Christ. See GRIC, *The Challenge of the Scriptures: the Bible and the Qur'an*, New York: Orbis, 1989, (original French ed. *Ces Ecritures qui nous questionnent: la Bible et le Coran*, Paris: Le Centurion, 1987). Troll has recently further contributed to this discussion in his, "Muhammad – Prophet auch für Christen?", in *Stimmen der Zeit*, 5/2007.

¹³ Q. 3:85 "If anyone desires a religion other than Islam, never will it be accepted of him; and in the Hereafter he will be in the ranks of the lost". The key here is the term "Islam". A minority of Muslim scholars, most notably ibn Arabi (d. 1240), who lived in Muslim Spain, have interpreted this in the generic sense of "all those who submit all to God alone", but the majority have interpreted it in the particular sense of "all those who submit to Islam, based on the revelation of the Qur'an and Prophethood of Muhammad".

¹⁴ The Qur'an speaks of an unknown number of Prophets, of whom 25 are mentioned by name, 21 of whom are shared with the biblical tradition. A Muslim is required to believe

impeccable,¹⁵ and came with a message that corrected errors that had crept into the earlier traditions, including Judaism and Christianity. Similarly, the Qur'an is held to be the last in a series of revelations sent by God to humankind, which will be preserved intact until the end of time. The theology of revelation within Islam requires that the Qur'an, like all the earlier revelations, is understood to be a literal, verbal revelation from God and thus literally the Word of God sent down to Muhammad, who received it without in any sense being the author. For a Christian to accept the Prophethood of Muhammad and the authority of the Qur'an as a Muslim does, it would be necessary immediately to convert to Islam or risk being condemned as a hypocrite. Clearly, I as a Christian cannot therefore make that statement of faith. When Muslims ask, as is often the case, "I accept Jesus as a Prophet who received true revelation from God, why then can't you accept the Prophethood of Muhammad and the message that he received?", the answer must begin with the foregoing clarification of terms; the Jewish and Christian traditions have a different definition of the term prophet and, in modern Western Christianity and Reform Judaism at least, a different understanding of revelation and thus "the word of God". The question then is not, "why can't you accept Muhammad and Qur'an as a Muslim does?", but rather, "what can you say of Muhammad and the Qur'an within your own terms of reference?"

There has been a long history in Christian polemic against Islam of attacking the character of Muhammad and looking for "the sources" from which the human Muhammad drew the material that he worked up into the Qur'an.¹⁶ Obviously this is not a productive line of discussion with Muslims as it begins from premises that are as unacceptable for Muslims as it would be to ask Christians to accept as the basis of discussion that there was no divinity in Christ and that he neither died nor was resurrected from the dead. The challenge to Christians then, throughout the centuries has been, "what say ye of Muhammad?" One of the earliest Christian responses to the question, which still remains a benchmark to this day, is that of the Nestorian Catholicos Timothy I

in all these Prophets without distinction; they all taught *in essence* the same message, viz submission of all to the one God, living an ethical life based on the revelations that God has sent, and the awareness of human accountability on the Day of Judgement.

¹⁵ Although there are various positions adopted on impeccability within the different schools of Islam, all accept at least that Muhammad was free from sin in all matters that pertained to the message that he received and taught.

¹⁶ See Daniel, N., *Islam and the West: the making of an image*, Oxford: Oneworld, 1993, and for the wider picture, Goddard, H., *A history of Christian-Muslim relations*, Edinburgh: EUP, 2000. For a secular literary-critical approach to the Qur'an, see Wansbrough, J., *Quranic Studies: sources and methods of scriptural interpretation*, New York: Prometheus, 2003.

(728-823), that “Muhammad walked in the way of the Prophets”.¹⁷ The way forward lies in asking how might it be that the spirit of prophecy, as understood within the Christian tradition, which is of course alive and active through the Christian centuries, might have been at work and inspiring the life and teaching of Muhammad?

As regards the Qur’an, Claude Geffré has already pointed to a helpful distinction between a Christian concept of Jesus as the Word of God incarnate, in a unique and definitive sense, without denying that that same Word of God was eternally present with God, was the effective cause of the creation of all that exists, was active in the teaching of the biblical and other prophets and illumines all that come into the world. This points to the re-exploration of a *logos* theology, in which the *logos* is uniquely incarnate in Christ, as the fullness of revelation, without saying that Christ is the sole locus of the revealed Word in human history. The critical question would be to ask how such a deposit of the Word in the Qur’an could post-date the Christ event. This might well require some consideration of a theology of time and eternity.

Islam regards Jesus as a Prophet; this is the highest accolade that can be given to any human being. On the level of ontology, all Prophets are equal, although each can have certain specificities.¹⁸ However, any sense that Jesus might be divine is strenuously denied by the Qur’an, including from his own lips.¹⁹ Muhammad grew up in a society in which there were whole families of idols within the Arabian pantheon, therefore not surprisingly the Qur’an will not tolerate any idea of God having a son or the description of Jesus as Son of God. To speak in such a way is repeating the errors of the ancients, for “far exalted in God above having a son”.²⁰ We are told that “God is not begotten, nor does God beget.”²¹ The imagery here, linked to the references to the families of gods amongst the Arabs, has clear overtones of a biological meaning to the term “Son of God” rather than a title used of Jesus within the context of the Hebrew scriptures. Such a misunderstanding is often reinforced in conversation with

¹⁷ The best source to trace these discussions is the two-volume work (Survey and Texts) of Gaudeul, J.M., *Encounters and Clashes: Islam and Christianity in history*, Rome: Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islam, 2000.

¹⁸ So Abraham is called “the Friend of God”, Moses is the one “to whom God spoke face to face”, Jesus is uniquely born of a virgin and Muhammad is the Last and Seal of the Prophets. However, being the Seal or authentication of all that went before, does give Muhammad the sense of being “first amongst equals” as is evidenced by him leading all the earlier Prophets in prayer when they met in Jerusalem on the Night Journey and Ascent of Muhammad into heaven. See *Encyclopaedia of Islam (Second Series)*; Leiden: Brill, 1993, Vol. VIII, p. 97–105, entry *mi’radj*.

¹⁹ Q. 5: 16

²⁰ Q. 4: 171 and 9: 30. For an entry level introduction to the question see my *Understanding Islam: the first ten steps*, London: SCM, 2006, p. 175–179.

²¹ Q. 112

Christians, who do not necessarily have a theologically developed understanding of the term.²² The Qur'anic critique of the way that Christians speak of Jesus is a clear call for us to work towards much more clarity in our exposition of Christian doctrine, especially as it is taught at popular levels.

One of the ways of dealing with such an issue is to draw out a Qur'anic Christology to be placed for study alongside those to be found in the New Testament. In this way we can explore the thesis that God might be at work in the Qur'an and Islamic tradition acting as a correction to certain excesses that have crept into the articulation, and possibly the reality, of Christian doctrine on the matter.²³ This might be paralleled to the way in which modern New Testament criticism has thrown up a whole range of challenges to re-visit the classical formulations of doctrine and examine afresh the scriptural bases on which they were constructed.²⁴

The commonly used term for Jews and Christians in the Qur'an is "People of the Book" (*Ahl al-Kitab*), which gives rise to another important issue.²⁵ The Qur'anic terms used for the process of revelation have the meaning of "being sent down", which has led to the development of a theology of revelation in which the uncreated Word of God is literally "sent down" upon the Prophet, who receives it without the engagement of his intellectual or creative powers.

²² There are of course Christians, some of whom are lay people who have been sitting before the pulpit each week for decades and others who are clerics, who do speak of Jesus in some biological way as a son of God, and call to bear witness thereto a biological understanding of the virgin birth. The Qur'an is adamant that Jesus was born of a technical virgin (there is no mention of Joseph in the Qur'anic accounts) but this is seen as a sign of the all-powerful nature of God, rather than as a sign of Jesus' being part- semi- or wholly-divine. A typical Muslim response would be to draw attention to Adam and Eve, who had neither mother nor father, and yet no-one holds them thus to be divine. The infancy narratives of Jesus are contained in the Qur'an in Q. 3: 35–47 and 9: 16–35.

²³ The Qur'an indeed refers to Christians and Jews as exaggerators who go too far or who commit excess in their religions; Q. 4: 171.

²⁴ From 1989 to 1991, the "Islam in Europe" Committee of the Council of European Episcopal Conferences and the Conference of European Churches conducted a wide consultation, with conferences in Milan, Leningrad and Birmingham, into teaching about Islam and Muslims in Europe in theological education. One central methodology is exemplified on the question of Christology: it was argued that Christian ministers and pastoral workers serving in Europe ought both to study about Islam and Muslims as a discrete subject and to study Qur'anic Christology, revelation, understanding of God, ethics etc. as part of those courses as taught currently in the theological establishments. A "Final Report" was drawn up after the 1991 conference in Birmingham and splendidly translated into the four principal languages of Europe, the better thus to gather dust. CCEE and KEK: *Islam in Europe Committee, Final Report: The presence of Muslims in Europe and the theological training of pastoral workers*, 1991.

²⁵ *Ahl al-Kitab*, literally "People of the Book" or perhaps better understood as "People of the Earlier Revelations" explicitly refers to Jews and Christians but also to two other groups, whose identities are less clear: the Sabeans, sometimes held to be the Mandæans of Iraq and sometimes also the Zoroastrians, and the Magians, often taken to refer to the Zoroastrians of Persia; see Q. 22: 17.

God remains, in this sense, the author of the Book. Such an understanding of revelation is most closely found in Orthodox Judaism, where the Torah was “given” to Moses. In this sense, Jews can fairly accurately be seen as the People of the Book, paralleling the Muslims and the Qur’an, however the same is not true of Christians, for whom “the book” plays a quite different role. The Qur’an tells us that Jesus received a Book from God, the *Injil*, in the same way that Muhammad received the Qur’an.²⁶ Not only is there no mention of such within Christian history but there would also be no place for it within a Christian understanding of Jesus as “the eternal Word of God incarnate”. Islam will have nothing to do with speaking of God incarnating in human form or indwelling in any created being or thing.

One of the key issues in Christian-Muslim relations is to explore the richness of a Christian understanding of Jesus as “the incarnate Word”. Far from being “People of the Book”, we are “People of the Incarnate Revelation”, with all that that has to say about the multifaceted nature of revelation embodied in a person as opposed to the “veiled text” of the Qur’an in Islamic understanding.²⁷ This Christology necessarily leads us into a discussion of Christian anthropology and thus to exploring the relationship between the human, Christ, and the divine, first in this life and then in the life hereafter. For Islam, although God is closer to each human being than our jugular vein,²⁸ God remains “other”, sublimely transcendent and impassible, and theological discourse on God is necessarily *apophatic*. Even in the hereafter, there will be an eternal rift between the Creator and the inhabitants of Paradise, at least for the mainstream of Muslims.²⁹

²⁶ Q. 57: 27. Nothing is known of the content or structure of the *Injil*, except that it existed. Muslim scholars have searched to identify it within the Christian tradition. Opinions range widely from those who see it as somehow related to the four canonical gospels, or to the direct speech of Jesus contained in those gospels, or as a source that stood behind the existing gospels that has since been lost (the mysterious Q of modern NT scholarship?) or to one of the apocryphal gospels. A case has been made by some, and widely supported in popular Islam following the work of Ahmed Deedat, to link it with “The Gospel of Barnabas”, which western scholarship, including some Muslims in the West, has identified as a 15th century Italian forgery but which “by happy coincidence” has Jesus recounting all that a Muslim would want him to say, including denying his divinity and foretelling the coming of Muhammad (see Slomp, J., “The Gospel in Dispute (A critical evaluation of the first French translation with the Italian Text and introduction to the so-called Gospel of Barnabas)” in *Islamochristiana*, Vol. 4, 1978, pp. 67–112).

²⁷ The term is deliberately chosen as a reminder that the Qur’an brooks no simplistic reading but possesses a multitude of commentaries from a wide range of perspectives: linguistic, historical, traditional, philosophical, rational, and mystical. The term is taken from Neal Robinson’s book, *Discovering the Qur’an: a contemporary approach to a veiled text*, London: SCM, 1996.

²⁸ Q. 50: 16

²⁹ There is a famous discussion amongst the Sufis about the ultimate relationship between God and the creation, which some have seen as a form of monism. The key exponent was ibn Arabi and the technical term *wahdat al-wujud*, translated as “unity of being”.

Such a discussion leads us to the theme of salvation. Islam begins with “the fall of Adam and Eve” but understood with subtle differences to the Christian understanding; most notably, Islam does not have a concept of Original Sin and thus there is no saviour motif in Islam.³⁰ In answer to the question, “who saves you?”, a Muslim would say that every human being is capable of living a life in total submission to the divine will and thus “I save myself”. Western Christian theology, following Augustine, Luther etc., has struck a major chord on the theme of salvation, atonement, vicarious substitution and so on, whereas it is worth noting that Eastern Christianity, which has a much longer history of living alongside Muslims and Islam, has much less place for Original Sin within its system, which strikes a chord much more weighted towards the incarnation as the decisive moment in the economy of salvation.³¹

Before leaving the anthropological theme, it is worth touching on the centrality in early Islam of the question of free will and pre-determinism, which forms a major fault line not only between Shi'a and Sunni perspectives on Islam but within these respective schools. Especially amongst the Sunnis, the dominant understanding through the centuries has been a variety of shades of predeterminism with the ever-present tendency towards fatalism. Freedom within Islamic thought is value-laden; the human being is free freely to choose to surrender all to the divine will. The concept here is at least close to the Christian model of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, in which Jesus surrenders himself to the will of God, “not my will but yours be done”.³²

Given Islam's stress on the centrality of the absolute oneness of God, *tawhid* being best translated as “unicity of God”, it is not surprising that there has always been a tension with any idea of a

This discussion is extremely technical and prone to many misunderstandings. The best introduction to its complexity is in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam (second series)*, Leiden: Brill, 2002, Vol. XI, entry *wahdat al-shuhud/wudjud*, p. 37–39.

³⁰ Adam is the first Prophet and thus sinless (but see note 15 above for an idea of the complexity of the concept within different schools of Islam), therefore “the fall” is usually seen in terms of “an error of judgement” by two people who lived in a state of absolute innocence, thus with no awareness of right and wrong. The result of the fall was the sending of Adam and Eve to earth, where, after a period of time, they repented and were reconciled with God. However God forgave them completely and restored them to the state of absolute harmony between God and creation, which is the definition of *islam*. For God, it is not impossible to forgive and restore absolutely and hence there is no need for a doctrine of Original Sin.

³¹ Within the Shi'a school of Islam, in which the Martyrdom of Imam Husayn plays a seminal role, there is an interesting discourse on redemptive suffering. See Ayoub, M., *Redemptive suffering in Islam: a study of the devotional aspects of Ashura in Twelver Shi'ism*, The Hague: Mouton, 1978.

³² It was the theme of the doctoral thesis of one of the greatest contemporary Scots Christian scholars of Islam, Wm Montgomery Watt. See Watt, W.M., *Free will and pre-destination in early Islam*, London: Luzac, 1948.

Trinitarian understanding of God as within the Christian system. There are many verses in the Qur'an that take the form "say not three" and "say not of God that God is the third of three" and an abhorrence of the idea that God can share divinity with any created being or thing.³³ There is much scholarly debate about whether the Qur'an is addressing a fully worked-out Christian theology of Trinity or rather warning absolutely against any straying into tritheism.³⁴ There is no doubt that in some strains of contemporary Christian rhetoric, liturgy and piety, especially in some of its popular forms, whatever theologians might hope, there is a straying into tritheistic discourse, and this is profoundly worrying for Muslims. An awareness that the doctrine of the Trinity was precisely developed to defend the oneness of God and to provide a code for speaking about that which lies beyond our ability to grasp is sadly lacking, and Muslims have just cause in their concern that the absolute oneness of God is at jeopardy in these circumstances. Even when Muslim and Christian theologians have taken great pains to clarify their terms and strive to understand one another, there remains a gulf between the two perceptions of God.³⁵

It is worth pausing to see how some contemporary Muslims in Britain understand what has happened to the message of Jesus under Christian custodianship. *A priori* Jesus was a true Prophet of God, who came with a pure message, in essence the same as that contained in the Qur'an. What happens after Jesus is that the message is distorted by those who call themselves Christians, so that it becomes a corruption of the truth. This corruption set in with Paul, who introduced ideas such as the divinity of Jesus, and laid the foundations for a doctrine of the Trinity and so on. This is a "Pauline Captivity" of Christianity, which through the influence of the Constantinian conversion and thus the accession to power, becomes dominant. Thus "Trinitarian Christians" gained political power and eventually wiped out, by argument and the sword, the true Unitarian followers of Jesus (e.g. Arius *et al.*). In this way, the Christianity of what passes for "Christian tradition" is a fundamental corruption of the pure teaching of Jesus, thus at the end of time, Jesus

³³ Q. 5: 73; 42: 11 etc.

³⁴ For an overview of the centrality of *tawhid* in Islamic thought, see al-Faruqi, I. R., *Al Tawhid: its implications for thought and life*, Hendon: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1992. For a taste of the polemic surrounding the question of the Trinity, see Thomas, D., *Anti-Christian polemic in early Islam: Abu 'Isa al-Warraq's "Against the Trinity"*, Cambridge: CUP, 1992. For a thoughtful modern Christian theology reflecting on the Trinity in inter-faith relations, see Igrave, M., *Trinity and Inter Faith Dialogue: plenitude and plurality*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2003

³⁵ Jean Marie Gaudeul's *Encounters and Clashes*, op.cit., contains several helpful abstracts of exchanges on this theme, from which one might gain a flavour of the discussions.

will rise up as the principal accuser of those who claim to be his followers.³⁶

One of the charges laid against Christians and Jews in the Qur'an is that they have taken their priests and rabbis as lords beside or in the place of God.³⁷ There is here a challenge to the magisterium, in which the rights of later Christian leaders to develop doctrinal statements that are not explicit in the teaching of Jesus are questioned. Muslims will often make comments, such as "where does Jesus speak about the Trinity in the gospels?", notwithstanding the fact that, as they exist today, the gospels are seen as a corrupted deposit of the original *Injil*. Similarly, when Muslims see Christian leaders making changes to the structure of the liturgy, admitting women to the ministry, or changing their understanding of homosexuality, they will ask by what right this is done and on which verses of the gospels the new teaching is based.

In Q. 4: 157-159 we read of the end of the earthly life of Jesus, or rather, from a Muslim perspective, the end of the first part of the earthly life of Jesus. Here we read that it only appeared to people that Jesus was crucified to death upon the cross but in reality Jesus was taken up to heaven by God. Many commentators have addressed these verses, the precise meaning of which is open to various interpretations.³⁸ There are interpretations that suggest that a substitution took place and someone else, perhaps Simon of Cyrene or Judas Iscariot, was crucified instead of Jesus, or again that Jesus was hung upon the cross but merely swooned and was taken down alive. Whatever happened, Jesus was taken up alive and now rests "in the heavens" until the Last Days, when, according to Islamic tradition, he will return to lead the great battle of good against evil, in which he will be acknowledged by all "true believers". After the inevitable victory, Jesus will rule the earth for a period of time in justice and truth, that is in accordance with the teaching of Islam. At the end of this time, Jesus will die, his one and only death, and will be buried in Madina, where his grave space awaits him alongside that of Muhammad. This will be the sign for the End of Time, when all alive will die and then all will be raised in the General Resurrection and move to the Final Judgement. However this verse is interpreted, we have basically "the ascension of an undead Jesus" and definitely not "the

³⁶ This interpretation of history, which is by no means universally accepted by Muslims but which shares common generic positions with a Muslim understanding that Christianity becomes corrupted by later alleged followers of Christ, is documented at length in two books widely read in Britain: 'Ata'ur-Rahim, M. and Ahmad Thomson, *Jesus Prophet of Islam*, London: Ta-Ha, 1996, and Thomson, A. and M. 'Ata'ur-Rahim, *For Christ's sake*, London: Ta-Ha, 1996.

³⁷ Q. 9: 31.

³⁸ For an analysis of Muslim commentary on these verses, see Robinson, N., *Christ in Islam and Christianity: the representation of Jesus in the Qur'an and the classical Muslim commentaries*, London: Macmillan, 1991.

death and resurrection to eternal life” required by Christianity. I call this “a disparity of fact”. How are we as Christians to handle such a question?

One way forward is to assemble evidence to support the Christian position from biblical and extra-biblical sources, and thus to try to convince Muslims of the truth of the Christian position. This is unlikely to be productive as it fails to take account of the internal Muslim logic, which begins from the premise that the Qur’an is the direct, literal Word of God and therefore uncontroversial. Muslims are simply not in a position to say that the Qur’an is wrong on this point. To admit that the Qur’an contains any errors is to demolish the sacrosanct principle that the Qur’an is vouchsafed by God to be protected from error for all time. As the Qur’an is a divinely revealed text, whatever it says comes direct from God and therefore cannot be countered by any amount of “evidence” from any other source. My approach is based on seeking mutual understanding; for Christians to understand why Muslims cannot gainsay the Qur’an and for Muslims to understand why the ascension of an undead Jesus simply disembowels the heart of the Christian message. After that, the question must be left for God to sort out at the end of time.³⁹

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it is worth perhaps noting some of the constructive contributions towards developing a theological understanding both of religious pluralism in the contemporary context and Christian-Muslim theological interaction. Hugh Goddard, Professor of Islamic theology at Nottingham tried to clarify some of the issues and their historical misunderstandings.⁴⁰ Atallah Siddiqui, the Director of the Markfield Institute and the foremost Muslim activist in relations with Christians in Britain today, wrote an illuminating thesis on six leading Muslim exponents of dialogue with Christians.⁴¹ Kenneth Cracknell, for decades a leading Methodist scholar and consultant to the World Council of Churches, has grappled with central Christian themes, such as salvation, Christology, spirituality and missiology in the context of religious pluralism.⁴² Michael Fitzgerald, a profound Christian scholar of Islam and for decades a leading figure in Roman engagement through his work at the Pontifical Institute for

³⁹ Q. 19: 37–40

⁴⁰ Goddard, H., *Christians and Muslims, from double standards to mutual understanding*, London: Curzon, 1995.

⁴¹ Siddiqui, A., *Christian-Muslim dialogue in the twentieth century*, London: Macmillan, 1997.

⁴² Cracknell, K., *In good and generous faith: Christian responses to religious pluralism*, London: Epworth, 2005.

the Study of Arabic and Islam and at the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, and John Borelli, a respected national adviser to the American churches, have attempted to survey and draw insights from their collective half-century of dedicated work in the field.⁴³ And finally Jacques Dupuis SJ, who, after fifteen years teaching theology in India and the same as Professor of Systematic Theology at the Gregorian University in Rome, attempted to pull together a magisterial systematic attempt at a theology drawn from the tradition but based on his own years of reflection and teaching.⁴⁴

This paper is of necessity something of an introductory sketch that flags up some of the issues in a field that is amongst the most pressing for contemporary Christianity, especially in Europe. There is a whole range of theological issues between Christians and Muslims that need to be drawn out and clarified with full respect to the historical and theological plurality within both traditions. There are challenges to develop a methodology that goes beyond polemics or apologetics, that faces the limitations to an understanding of simple truth, and that returns the academic theological discourse to the realm of faith and accountability before God. Once we take God seriously as being in a relationship with both communities, this introduces a note of humility, to ask what God might be saying to Christians in a revelation six hundred years after the death of Jesus; in a Prophet who has a much broader spectrum of lived engagement than Jesus: as politician, society builder and legislator, husband and father, and as the Commander in Chief of the Muslim army; and of a fast-growing community world-wide, who are living amongst us in Europe as never before, and with whom we are required, under God, to enter into dialogue. For Muslims, of course, this situation prompts the need to return to their understanding of who Jesus was for Christians, of the centrality of revelation and the resurrection for Christians, of the challenge of a *kenotic* Christ who becomes the Suffering Servant unto death, and of the need to come to terms with the possibility that God has spoken in Christ in a way that has been “correctly” understood by modern Christians and whose message and Way remains valid and challenging even after the coming of Prophet Muhammad.

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⁴³ Fitzgerald, M., and J. Borelli, *Interfaith dialogue: a Catholic view*, London: SPCK, 2006.

⁴⁴ Dupuis, J., *Towards a Christian theology of religious pluralism*, New York: Orbis, 1997.