

Dialogue and Difference



**Essays based on a series of inter-faith seminars held at Ripon
College, Cuddesdon in the Autumn of 2005 and organised in
collaboration with the Oxford Diocesan Committee for Inter-
Faith Concerns**

Edited by Hugh Boulter

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Cover photo: Lighting column in the courtyard of the Umayyad Mosque, Damascus.
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Foreword

Very few people, coming to the close of the twentieth century and conscious of entering a third millennium, would have predicted that the early years of the twenty-first century would most likely be shaped by religious forces. To those complacent minds formed in the secularism of the 1960s, together with the end of Communism and the apparent triumph of Capitalism, the idea of a resurgence in religious ideology as a major global force would have barely seem credible. And yet, here we are, battling as never before to understand otherness, difference and diversity – and to reach across cultural and religious divides in order to achieve a new consensus and coalescence that will help shape the future.

In this respect, inter-religious dialogue has evolved rapidly: from being a concern of marginal interest to being an important and vital key to making sense of the world that is emerging in the wake of September 11th 2001, and subsequently in our country July 7th 2005. Theologians are often not the best people to reflect on events; their eyes are more usually fixed on the timeless, and on those select issues that might affect the future of faith. But September 11th is one of those pivotal moments in time that prods theologians, and asks them what they are doing to facilitate dialogue and understanding across the faiths, especially when one of the underlying causes of September 11th arguably centres on contested sacred space many thousands of miles away.

On that fateful day, a colleague of mine in Connecticut (about two hours drive from New York), had just commenced a seminar on Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations, hosted at Hartford Theological Seminary, a renowned research institute. By 9am the seminar had stopped, and the leaders of different faiths had gathered around a TV to watch the breaking news. By noon, they had moved to the chapel to offer collective prayer, united in their disbelief and shock, and yet bound together by faith. The outcome of that day is a remarkable book called, unsurprisingly, *11 September: Religious Perspectives on the Causes and Consequences* (Markham & Abu-Rabi', 2002), in which theologians reflect on the events and their significance. As the authors point out, there is not much dialogue going on between these groups and distinct discourses, and the inter-religious conversations that might foster better understandings are still relatively rare. But, if there is to be any real hope, institutions and faiths must begin to take responsibility for promoting such dialogue.

In perhaps a rather more modest way, the essays and reflections in this volume represent our own contribution as a diocese to these issues. The dialogues that are represented here are an attempt to overcome difference and otherness, yet respect it. They endeavour to face diversity, yet be fully faithful to our own Christian lives and beliefs. They are an attempt to 'over-hear' the voices and conversations of others, so that our own perception of others shifts from one of ignorance to one of understanding.

Inter-religious dialogue is never a perfected mode of discussion. It is, by definition, often a ragged and untidy exercise in conversation and comprehension. But it is also a profoundly compelling form of engagement, and one to which Christians are increasingly committed. The contributions in this volume represent the fruit of a series of gatherings organised by the Diocese of Oxford and hosted by Ripon College

Cuddesdon, that took place in 2005, and convened by Rosy Fairhurst and Hugh Boulter. We are delighted to have played a small part in facilitating this initiative, and warmly commend the volume for study and discussion. Readers are, of course, not expected to agree with everything they may read – merely to engage with otherness more openly – and in so doing, reflect upon and deepen their own faith and understanding.

*Revd. Canon Prof. Martyn Percy
Principal, Ripon College Cuddesdon*

Reference

Eds. Markham, Ian & Abu-Rabi', Ibrahim M. *11 September: Religious Perspectives on the Causes and Consequences* (Oneworld, Oxford 2002)

Foreword

The series of seminars organised by the Oxford Diocesan Committee for Inter-faith Concerns and Ripon College, Cuddesdon have helpfully modelled the way in which discussions of the important and often difficult issues which arise in inter faith relations, can be managed sensitively and at depth. The context of the seminars at the Anglican Theological College at Cuddesdon enabled an important interchange between different audiences. First the wider lay audience, for whom inter faith relations are an increasingly important backdrop to their working contexts; secondly, parish and other clergy, who have a responsibility for guiding their communities theologically and pastorally and for relating to clergy of other faiths; and thirdly, ordinands whose training and experience will influence the future effectiveness of the Church in an increasingly plural world. That these different audiences are addressed in relation to each other is vitally important: theological colleges have a responsibility to lay as well as to ordained; clergy have a responsibility to their congregations and parish communities; lay people have much to teach clergy about their actual experiences and encounters.

This format provided an atmosphere in which experience and newness as well as theological and practical concerns were held together in a rich and effective mix. In such discussions it is also important that there be effective input from the different Faiths under discussion, on the generally accepted principle that it is those who are committed to a Faith who should be the primary exponents of it to others. This aspect was well catered for by the panel of speakers across the seminar series.

It might be thought, and is sometimes said, that a rural Oxfordshire location such as Cuddesdon is inappropriately distanced from the realities of inter religious encounter. This would be to misconceive the situation in several respects. The encounter with people of other religious commitment is not now, if it ever was, limited to urban or inner urban neighbourhoods. It is, as the Church of England's *Presence and Engagement* report demonstrated, widespread in suburban, town and village contexts as well and is a matter not just of residence, but of workplace, educational institutions and leisure encounter. More importantly, however, is the implied attitude that religious plurality is a 'minority interest'. The contrary must increasingly become true, both for the sake of understanding the world in which we live, for the prospects of peace and from a Christian perspective for an understanding of the place of different religions in the economy of God and God's mission expressed in the life, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Reverend Canon Guy Wilkinson
Secretary for Inter Faith Relations to the Archbishop of Canterbury

Reference

Church of England, Mission and Public Affairs Council *Presence and Engagement: the churches' task in a multi Faith society* (Church House Bookshop: London 2005)

Introduction

Hugh Boulter

These essays, *Dialogue and Difference*, are based on a series of seminars held at Ripon College, Cuddesdon in the autumn of 2005. They arose out of discussions in the Oxford Diocesan Committee for Inter-faith Concerns (ODCIC) where we identified three main issues which we considered were of particular concern to Christians in Britain today. The first two essays reflect a concern about alternative spirituality: Paganism, Wicca and various forms of New Age spirituality. The last two essays focus on the current debate about Islam and Christianity and their *modus vivendi* today. The central essay is on an important but less discussed issue, the relationship between racial justice and inter-faith dialogue. Within the Anglican community in Britain there has been much discussion about racial justice and black Christians in the Church. Less has been said about how Christians should apply the principles of racial justice to those of other faiths.

In organising these seminars, ODCIC was greatly helped by the invaluable support of Ripon College, Cuddesdon and the Reverend Rosy Fairhurst in particular. Their warm hospitality did much to ensure a high attendance at all the seminars, despite the dark evenings. We are most grateful to the Reverend Professor Canon Martyn Percy and the Reverend Canon Guy Wilkinson who each chaired one of the seminars and both of whom have contributed forewords; also to Bishop (now Lord) Richard Harries who chaired the final seminar. A main function of ODCIC is to disseminate information about inter-faith issues to as wide an audience as possible and, therefore, we agreed from the outset to publish the proceedings of the seminars; hence this booklet.

Kate West in her contribution on *Paganism and Alternative Spirituality* not only gives a *tour d'horizon* of the different forms of Paganism in Britain today, she seeks to dispel some of the misconceptions which are held by Christians and other members of society. She highlights the three main tenets of Paganism: belief in the Divine, respect for nature, and the right of individuals to choose their own spiritual path. She goes on to detail the various seasonal festivals which mark the Pagan year, as well as Pagan belief in re-birth or reincarnation, the power of magic and the importance of ritual. She touches briefly on Druidism, Shamanism and the Nordic Tradition, and says rather more about Wicca or Witchcraft, her own particular path. In dispelling some of the misconceptions about paganism, she stresses those aspects which Paganism shares with more 'mainstream' belief systems: belief that there is a higher power than ourselves, belief in an after-life, and belief in doing one's best and in helping those around one.

John Drane, in his essay on *Wicca and Christianity*, affirms his own faith and asserts that a strength of Christianity is its openness to self-criticism and hence it has an ability to change to meet new challenges. He broadly agrees with Kate West's outline of Paganism and sees it as holding up a mirror to Christianity in three main areas. First, he sees Paganism as laying an important emphasis on the immanence of the Divine. Christianity has all too often emphasised the transcendent nature of God and neglected the presence of God within. Secondly, Paganism places a welcome emphasis on the importance of nature and human responsibility towards creation. Thirdly, he sees Paganism as reminding Christianity of the healing mission of Jesus,

which can all too easily be overlooked. The main question which he poses to Paganism is its tendency to accept the *status quo* because it is 'natural'. It does not have a mechanism for explaining and dealing with the wrongs and the injustices of the world. By facing these questions, Drane envisages a dialogical process where each can learn from the other.

Hugh Boulter holds a similar dynamic view of the nature of dialogue. His essay on *Racial Justice and Inter-faith Dialogue* takes Lochhead's model of dialogue and Allport's model of racial prejudice and, by juxtaposing them, throws light on the twin dangers of communal isolation and 'antilocution' – Allport's term for racial abuse and stereotyping. He suggests that the way forward is the dialogue of action, working together on joint projects of mutual interest, in order to combat communal isolation, and for dialogue proper to combat and overcome antilocution. This requires different communities meeting together to discuss issues of concern and difference. These issues will often involve the secular and the religious, and racial justice will only be achieved when, in a spirit of parity of esteem, different faith communities are prepared to discuss these problematic issues in order to generate new understanding.

Anthony O'Mahony offers a strategic overview in his essay, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Christian view*. Christians and Muslims make up over half the world's population. The relationships between these two faiths take place in every continent and are seen as significant by members of other faiths as well. O'Mahony sees the challenges to Christianity as being Islam's claim to be the primordial religion which has superseded both Judaism and Christianity and its denial of the Incarnation, the Trinity, the Crucifixion and the validity of Christian scripture. He urges us not to look back to some supposed time in history when Muslim-Christian relations were ideal, but rather to look forward. In particular he challenges Muslims to consider whether their traditional view of Judaism and Christianity is binding for all time or whether there are the theological resources within Islam for 'doctrinal development or theological growth'.

Ataullah Siddiqui to some extent seeks to address this challenge in his essay, *Christian-Muslim Relations: Perceptions and Perspectives*. He traces the relations between the two faiths from the Mediaeval period, through colonial times and the post-second world war period to the present day. A key turning point was the Mongol invasions of the Fertile Crescent in the thirteenth century when Islam ceased to engage with the philosophical thought of the West and, following Ibn Taymiyyah, sought to retain its own purity against Christian influences. Following the divisive effect of the colonial period and the disillusion with post-second world war nationalism, Islam feels itself to be under economic and political threat again today; hence the reversion by many Muslims to the conservative thought of Ibn Taymiyyah. Nonetheless there has always been a more outward looking strand in Muslim thought and Siddiqui believes that Islam has the resources to rediscover the 'Prophetic tradition that considers both Christians and Muslims as part of an extended family'.

Running through all these contributions is a question about the nature and purpose of dialogue itself. Ian Markham, to whom Martyn Percy refers in his *Foreword*, writes: 'It is in dialogue that truth will be illuminated, contrasts realised, disagreements recognized and of course confronted.' Underlying this is the assumption that we can learn from each other without losing our identity; that faith traditions are not

unchanging entities and that through dialogue we can to a greater or lesser extent generate new solutions to the challenges which face us.

Reference

Markham, Ian S. *Truth and the Reality of God – An Essay in Natural Theology* (T&T Clark: Edinburgh 1998)

Paganism and Alternative Spirituality

Kate West

Firstly I'd like to thank you for inviting me here today to talk about Paganism. I welcome the opportunity to try to dispel the myths about our beliefs, and to share with those of other faiths the things which we hold in common. I believe that we have more in common than we do in difference.

To try to explain Paganism in 20 to 30 minutes is a bit like trying to explain the whole range of Christian beliefs in the same amount of time! Indeed it is worse, as there are no authorities recognised by all Pagans as representing them, and little consensus between those who describe their beliefs as Pagan. Indeed, it is said of Pagans that if you get six of them in the same room, you'll get at least seven different opinions on almost any topic of your choice.

However to attempt to define Paganism, Chambers dictionary (1991) defines Pagan as:

“A heathen; a person who is not a Christian, Jew or Muslim; more recently, someone who has no religion; a person who sets a high value on sensual pleasures.”

And Paganism as:

“Heathenism; the beliefs and practices of the heathen. [L. paganus, rustic, peasant, civilian, (because the Christians reckoned themselves soldiers of Christ) – pagus, a district]”

Most of today's Pagans would strongly dispute the part about “no religion”, although some would say that their spiritual beliefs are not a religion because they are not under the orchestration of some central body or group. And many would disagree with the statement “sets a high value on sensual pleasures” because for today's Pagans it is their spirituality which they feel sets them apart. These definitions are obviously influenced by the Latin from which the words derive. The same Latin, which was introduced by the invading Romans, defined people according to their social standing - i.e. rustic, peasant etc. Clearly this does not make for a workable definition for today's Pagans.

However, one way of defining Pagans is through the basic tenets which draw them together, Paganism being effectively an ‘umbrella’ term for a number of spiritual paths which hold the following beliefs in common:

They believe that the Divine is either both male and female, equally and in balance, or that it is without gender.

They believe in a respect for nature.

They believe that everyone is entitled to their own, informed, spiritual path, so long as it harms no-one else.

These three tenets may provide us with a way of defining modern Paganism, but they are not the whole of Pagan beliefs, and they deserve further explanation.

The belief that the Divine is either both male and female, equally and in balance, and that we should seek that balance in our own lives. Many Pagans believe that there is a Goddess and a God, and that each may have many names. Others believe that there is but one Divine which is without gender, but contains the essence of maleness and femaleness in balance. One of the best analogies that I can offer is to consider a mirror ball such as is used to reflect light around a room. If the whole ball is the divine, then each facet is an aspect, with an equal number being male and female. There is one divine and yet many Goddesses and Gods. Hence Paganism can be both polytheistic and monotheistic, at one and the same time.

Respect for nature. Some go further and say reverence for nature, but I am only too aware how easy it is for words to be misinterpreted. Pagans do not worship trees, rocks, etc, but they do believe that the essence of the divine runs through all things, and for that matter, all people. This starts with the fact that we do not sacrifice people, or animals of any kind, although neither are we all vegetarians. Respect for nature doesn't mean that we are all eco-warriors cementing ourselves to trees to halt the onset of progress, but we do try to live in a way which lessens our impact on the planet. Respect for nature therefore means that we endeavour to take no more than we need and do our best to repay that which we do take. Pagans recycle, support second-hand shops and try to be creative rather than destructive. We try to actively care for the land around us and indeed for the people in our community.

The belief that everyone is entitled to their own, informed, spiritual path, so long as it harm no-one else. The key word here for me is informed. The vast majority of Pagans believe that young people should be educated about religious beliefs, but not focussed onto any one path. In other words; not taught religion, but about religions. We prefer to teach our young about behaving responsibly, and to have respect for all life, for other people and for property. We believe that, in spirituality, there is no 'one true way'. I have many friends who hold different beliefs to mine and I believe that their paths are as right for them as mine is for me. Belief, or faith, should not be about numbers, but about whether that belief benefits the holder whilst harming nobody else.

Having looked closer at the three tenets there are other things which most Pagans believe. **First, personal responsibility.** We are each responsible for our words and actions; there is no external force which will make us do good or bad. Pagans do not worship the devil: they don't even believe that one exists. There is no need for a 'negative divine'; humanity has quite sufficient capacity to behave badly, just as it has the capacity to behave well.

We are each our own priest or priestess. There is no overall hierarchy in Paganism or within any of its paths. We have no 'specialists' who interpret or intercede with the divine for us. We are each capable of doing so on our own behalf. We may have people whose advice and guidance is sought, but we do not give anyone the authority to tell us how to worship or how to behave.

Our respect for nature is also reflected in the way we celebrate our seasonal festivals, the eight Sabbats collectively known as the Wheel of the Year. They are:

Samhain 31st Oct

For Pagans this is the end of one year and the beginning of the next. It is a time of remembrance and celebration of those who have gone before. We do not summon the spirits of the dead but may set a place at the feast for the spirits of those we have lost.

Yule on or close to 21st Dec

The Winter Solstice marks the end of the days of declining daylight. This festival celebrates the re-birth of the Sun., and the onset of increasing light.

Imbolg 2nd Feb

This marks the first signs of life returning to the land, the first buds on the trees, the first shoots springing from the earth, and the first ewes in lamb.

Oestara around 21st March

The Spring Equinox is the festival of the Goddess Eostar, who symbolises the cycle of life, death and rebirth, and whose symbols are the egg and the hare.

Beltane 1st May

When the Hawthorn blossoms, we celebrate the marriage of the Goddess and the God, and their union for the fertility of the land.

Litha around 21st June

The Summer Solstice marks the height of the Sun's power. From this point on the days will shorten and the nights lengthen.

Lughnasadh 1st August

At the beginning of the harvest, we give thanks for the bounty of the Goddess and the God and pay homage to the land.

Madron around 21st Sept

The Autumn Equinox, like that of spring, marks a time of balance. This is a time of reckoning, for ensuring that we have repaid our debts, whether literal, emotional or spiritual.

This summary barely scratches the surface, but whilst I'd like to do more justice to the festivals I have nowhere near enough space to do so here. For some Pagans the solar festivals, the solstices and equinoxes are more important, while for others it's the agricultural festivals which are considered of greater significance.

In some Pagan paths the cycles of the Moon are also marked. This raises another common misconception: Pagans do not worship the Moon. Meetings and Rituals may take place in tune with the phases of the Moon, but it is the Goddess and the God who are worshipped, not the Moon itself. The Lunar phases are seen as a reflection of the aspects of the Goddess in her roles as Maiden, Mother and Crone.

Pagans believe in the re-birth of the spirit, or reincarnation. We believe that after death the spirit travels to a place we call the Summerlands where we review the life

we have lived and select the lessons we will learn in the next life. Here we may also meet with those we have loved and who have gone on before. By reincarnation we do not mean that an individual comes back as the same person, but rather that their spirit continues. For us death is not the end, but an interlude between lives.

Pagans believe in magic. This is not the conjuring of the stage, nor the special effects of the movie industry, but rather the ability to create change through the focus of will. Forget everything you have read in books and seen on TV. This is not as simple as following a 'recipe' or reciting a 'charm'. For magic to work, the person who uses it has to be in balance within themselves and with the energies of the elements. They also need to be able to draw upon the energy of spirit, that is the Goddess and the God. Another thing which is worth bearing in mind is that magic only works within the constraints of the natural world. For example; if you work a spell to fix your flat tyre by the roadside, the chances are that someone will come along to assist you – the nuts will not whiz through the air, nor the spare tyre leap out of the boot! In addition, the amount of change an individual can make is limited: my spell to protect wildlife from being killed on the road will not protect all animals, on all roads, everywhere, for ever! But it will reduce the numbers harmed locally for a time. We also believe that magic should be used to help and to heal, and that those who try to misuse magic will find that it turns against them.

Pagans express their beliefs in their lives and in ritual. Belief in the Goddess as well as the God means that male and female are treated equally. Respect for nature means that we try to leave a place as good, if not better, than we found it. Belief in personal responsibility means that when we do someone a wrong, we try to set it right again, and to learn from this.

As well as rituals to celebrate the festivals, **we have our own Rites of Passage:** our own form of marriage which we call Handfasting, as well as rites of naming for our children, and rites of withdrawal for those who die. Pagan rituals are as varied as the people who practise them. They may be simple or complex, involve one person or many, take place indoors or outside. Yes, you may come across a group of robed figures in the woodland dancing around a (safely contained) fire, but equally the same rites could be celebrated by a middle aged woman sat in a chair in her living room. For those who find the term ritual disconcerting I'd like to point out that a ritual is simply a series of actions performed to bring about a result; like the various steps in making a cup of tea, or what some religions would call a service.

I have mentioned that **there are many different paths within Paganism**, so perhaps I should elaborate a little. Firstly, I should point out that there are no accurate figures on the number of Pagans, although the most reliable estimates indicate between 200,000 and 400,000 in the UK, let alone how many follow one path or another. But by far and away the largest group is that of Wiccans and Witches, followed by Druids, those of the Northern tradition, and those whose path is Shamanic. There are also other smaller groups and, of course, those who simply prefer to be known as Pagan.

The most misunderstood of these paths is that of Witchcraft. This is my path, and therefore the one which I know best. As you can see, Witches are not the hook-nosed, baby-eating caricatures of fairytales. Nor, as I have already indicated, have they sold their souls to the devil they do not believe in! For Witches, the Divine is the Triple

Aspected Goddess and the Horned God. Horned, not as in the commonly held view of Satan, but because the God is Lord of the Forest and of the Hunt. We celebrate our rituals in tune with the cycles of the Moon and the Wheel of the Year. The path of the Witch is almost as varied as that of the Pagan. There are many different types of Witch: Gardnerian, Alexandrian, Traditional, Hereditary and Dianic, to name but a few. Witchcraft has its factions, just like other beliefs.

The Druids are more solar based in their beliefs, and consider that the Divine is the life-force, or Awen, which flows through all things. Like Witches there are different kinds of Druid, just one of which are the people you see in dressed in white to celebrate the Summer Solstice at Stonehenge.

The Northern, or Norse, tradition is largely based upon the Nordic pantheon and is somewhat more prevalent in those places where the Vikings settled.

Whilst most varieties of Pagan will work in groups or alone, those of **the Shamanic persuasion** almost invariably work as solitaries. They may work with one of a number of pantheons or even within some of the aforementioned groups.

It is this very variety of belief systems, rather than beliefs, which Pagans celebrate and which draws many to the Pagan path, for it is the individual's choice of how to approach their perception of the Divine.

There are many misconceptions about Pagans and Paganism, although it's noticeable that perceptions have changed radically in the last 15 – 20 years. Some of these I trust are by now fairly redundant, including: devil worship, child or animal sacrifice. There are others, which are less extreme but every bit as distasteful.

Pagans are sometimes said to be morally bankrupt. This may well have its roots in the time when Pagan marriages were not recognised by the church and therefore the state. Actually they are still not recognised, but that does not in any way cancel out the commitment of the participants. This goes hand in hand with the suggestion that Pagan rites are all about sex. As Pagans we talk a lot about fertility, but this is usually in the context of the fertility of the land. It can also mean fertility in terms of the mind and in life generally. Occasionally, of course, rites are performed to secure pregnancy but even then these do not involve sex, other than between the couple concerned.

Another claim is that Pagans lure and entrap young people into their groups.

Whilst it is a sad fact of life that, wherever there is an interest there will be someone who is out to exploit it, usually for financial gain, reputable Pagan groups have firmly set age limits. Generally speaking people under the age of 18 are not allowed to join groups in the 'real world', exceptions occasionally being made where a teenager wishes to join their parents' group. In cyber-land some sites will allow those under 18 to join on-line groups, but here there are strict controls about the exchange of personal information and the young person usually has to prove parental consent. Of course there will always be those who seek to circumvent these restrictions, whether by being devious or by setting up their own websites, but on the whole the Pagan community does its best to protect the young. They are, after all, our future.

The freeform nature of Pagan beliefs also leads to **the charge that we have no 'rules' to prevent us doing wrong.** However, the Wiccan Rede; "An it harm none, do what you will", and the law of threefold return "whatever you do, good or ill, will be returned to you three times over" are both accepted in one form or another by most Pagans. And of course rules of any kind are only effective when people follow them.

It is also said that there is no historical basis to the Paganism of today. This is something which it is impossible to really argue. It would be unrealistic to expect written evidence to have survived and besides it is actually not at all pertinent. Having a historic basis is not a prerequisite for a spiritual belief system. Certainly I would accept that modern Pagans have largely re-invented themselves, and will continue to do so.

Although these negative attitudes still persist to a greater or lesser extent, what is interesting, and to my mind far more useful, are the very core beliefs which Paganism has in common with the more 'mainstream' belief systems:

Belief that there is a higher power than ourselves

Belief in an after-life

Belief in doing one's best and in helping those around you.

Conclusion

I am sometimes asked to explain the comparatively recent growth of Paganism and what attracts people to these paths. There is no one straightforward answer to this, but I do feel that it has a lot to do with the emphasis on personal responsibility, development and growth. People today have little confidence in 'authority'. They feel able, and want, to make their own decisions about how they live their lives, whether spiritual or secular. And they deeply distrust the idea that someone else should be allowed to make moral judgements on their behalf. But this is not a competition or a numbers game; from the perspective of Pagans what we really seek is to be accepted as just another belief system.

I'd like to end with a comment on the human mind: "Minds are like parachutes, they work best when they're open". So I'd like to thank everyone here for bringing their parachutes with them. For those who would like further information I can give you a few contact addresses which may be able to help you (see below).

Further information is available from:

The Pagan Federation

One of the largest Pagan organisations in Europe.
BM Box 7097, London WC1N 3XX (SAE appreciated)
www.paganfed.org

The Children of Artemis

Europe's foremost organisation for Wiccans and Witches.
BM Box Artemis, London WC1N 3XX (SAE appreciated)

www.witchcraft.org

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Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE (SAE appreciated)

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Wicca and Christianity

John Drane

Introduction

Whenever I have the opportunity to talk in this sort of public space with someone from another faith tradition, the first thing I usually do is to ask myself why I am still a Christian. I think there are three main answers to that question:

- First of all is Jesus: I like him, I find his teaching inspirational and his example challenging.
- There is also the capacity that Christianity has for self-criticism. Over the centuries, many things have been said and done in the name of Christianity that I would not wish to identify with (not least in relation to the devotees of nature-based faiths such as Wicca). But it is from within the Christian tradition (the Bible as well as subsequent historical developments) that I find the resources and insights to challenge those mistakes. The fact that the church can always be reforming in response to new challenges is, for me, a moral as well as a cultural strength.
- I have also discovered that it works! I've faced some tough experiences in my life, not least the death of one of my children, and knowing that at the heart of the cosmos, pain matters – and can be redemptive – has been an important part of my own discovery of healing and purpose.

I therefore welcome the opportunity for dialogue. As I understand it, the purpose of dialogue between Wiccans and Christians is not to mix-and-match or to try and amalgamate these two somewhat different spiritual pathways: doing that would involve a serious distortion of both of them. Dialogue offers the opportunity

- To get a clearer understanding of each other's positions firsthand, rather than by hearsay.
- To look at another person's view in such a way that the similarities and differences between them can bring both belief systems into sharper focus, so as to identify key questions and to invite clarification on particular points.
- To offer honest challenge to each another. Whatever our differences, there are areas where both Wiccans and Christians have mutual interests and face similar questions. Dialogue with Wiccans invites Christians to go back to their roots and in the process to rediscover some important things that we have overlooked, and at the same time the Christian message also offers some constructive challenges for Wiccans.

Some History

The relationship between Craft and Church has been marked by a great deal of antagonism from the Christian side, and Wiccans have many justifiable reasons for being wary of Christians. Not only is there a history of persecution in Europe and

North America from the middle ages to the nineteenth century, but even today most Christian books about the subject misrepresent and distort the facts, presenting Wiccans as a danger to society if not to the very cosmos itself. My own approach is rather different. I believe that Wicca has something serious to say about the state of the world and its people, and also that this understanding offers significant theological challenges to the Church that invite Christians to reflect more profoundly on their own tradition. Like so much of today's popular spirituality, Wicca is a mirror in which we can

see ourselves reflected
for all the things we have neglected.

A major reason why so many New Spiritualities are flourishing today is that they engage with vital issues that resonate with today's lifestyles, and these are mostly issues on which Christians either have nothing to say, or have nothing to say that makes any sense.

What then can I affirm about Wicca?

Many things, some of which will be spelled out in more detail below. But there are three underlying fundamental assumptions that should unite Wiccans and Christians:

- First of all, a departure from the arid rationalist, anti-supernaturalism that was all-pervasive throughout the modern era.
- The perception that far from being a mere object for detached analysis – or as an expendable resource to be exploited – the earth is in some way sacred and imbued with spiritual powers.
- The conviction that we ought to have a unified or holistic understanding of reality – that the spiritual is perfectly normal and impacts the whole of life, in relationships, child rearing, education, health, business activities and so on.

I take these things to be common ground between Wiccans and Christians.

What can Christians learn from Wiccans, and Wiccans from Christians?

God

Wicca is a nature-based spiritual pathway, insisting on the immanence or intimacy of the divine in the natural world. This is hardly alien to classic Christian thought, where the divine is both transcendent and immanent, separate from creation as well as being present everywhere within it. From the time of Constantine's conversion in 312 CE until relatively recently, the church has generally preferred to emphasize transcendence. But if we go back to the Bible, it gives strong affirmation to the immanence of the divine Spirit within the natural world. The Hebrew word *ruah* appears more than three hundred times and is variously translated (depending on the context) as 'spirit', 'wind' or 'breath'. The divine *ruah* hovered over the earth at the creation (Genesis 1:2), and is continuously operative in maintaining, sustaining, and renewing the creation (see, for example, Psalm 104, Hebrews 1:3). The Wiccan insistence on the immanence of divinity highlights one way in which Christian theology has sometimes been detached from its scriptural roots.

At the same time, Christians have always believed that the divine is more than just a vague spiritual force, but is a personal being who can best be known in a context of relationship, whether within the divine trinity itself, or in the wider forum of the world and its peoples. Wiccans can be as diverse as Christians, but generally are more likely to think of the divine in impersonal terms, even when the names of ancient gods and goddesses may be invoked. Christians can reasonably suggest that seeing not only the divine, but also the world, in relational terms, is a more noble vision than one which deals only in abstract metaphysical forces.

Creation

There is a similar dynamic with regard to Wiccan understandings of care for the earth, its systems and creatures. Until very recently, Christians have had little to say on this topic. For the most part, this happened by default as a consequence of the lack of a meaningful understanding of divine immanence – and so the natural world was just taken for granted as the stage on which humans carried out their rather more important work. Of course, by aligning themselves with the sort of capitalist industrialism that has exploited the earth's resources, some Western Christians had a vested interest in being disinterested in such matters – while many more believe that none of it matters anyway, because when we die we go to heaven and have no more use for this material world.

When we go back to the roots of the tradition, though, it is hard to justify any of this:

- The Biblical creation narratives make it clear that the primordial humans were placed on earth as gardeners, to look after the creation, and with a divinely-given responsibility for looking after the world (Genesis 2:15).
- The world is nowhere described as a clock that was wound up by the Creator but then left to its own devices. Throughout scripture, the divine Spirit is intimately involved in maintaining and sustaining all life – and in the New Testament this function is vested in Christ, portrayed in cosmic terms (Colossians 1:15-17). Debasing the creation is equivalent to mocking the person and work of Christ – something that would count as heresy in a different frame of reference.
- Many other Bible passages highlight care for the world. After the great flood, the divinely given covenant promise specifically includes animals and the whole of creation as well as Noah and his family. The law books of the Hebrew scriptures, especially Deuteronomy, also include numerous environmentally friendly principles for tending the earth, including sabbaticals for the land as well as people, and important statements about creating a sustainable economy that would benefit both land and people.
- All the eschatological images of a new heaven and new earth include the renewal of nature, with animals playing a significant part in descriptions of a renewed world (for example, Isaiah 11:6-9, 65:17-25, Revelation 21:1-22:7).
- Moreover, the significance of Jesus' cross and resurrection is not limited to the redemption of individuals, but affects the entire cosmos (Romans 8:19-23), and the various images of judgment to be found in the Bible also imply that human beings are accountable for their attitudes to the natural world.

Sacred Spaces

Wiccan ritual emphasizes attunement to the forces of nature – hence the popularity of holding ceremonies in the open air, in forests, on mountains, or by the ocean. Some Wiccans believe there are natural locations of special power connected by ley lines - places like Stonehenge, Iona, Glastonbury, Uluru, Mt Shasta, and so on - and that by attuning ourselves with these we can achieve both personal and cosmic harmony. This also has its parallels in some significant aspects of the Christian tradition, and the Bible offers many examples of spiritual encounters related to geographical places. At the very start of the story, Adam and Eve find themselves in a mystical garden where the divine is immediately accessible (Genesis 3:8). Throughout the book of Genesis, there are numerous stones and trees in which the divine spirit seems to be concentrated – not to mention the burning bush, and later Mount Sinai, where Moses encountered divinity, or indeed the Temple in Jerusalem which became a focus for Isaiah’s experiences – or, for that matter, the transfiguration of Jesus which took place significantly on a mountaintop.

Healing

Healing is another Wiccan concern that connects directly with the Christian tradition. Healing is one of the foremost of divine attributes (Exodus 15:26), and of course was a central activity in the ministry of Jesus, who singled it out as a sign of the new world order (Luke 4:16-21). Later New Testament passages make it clear that this was an ongoing activity of the early church (1 Corinthians 12:9-10, James 5:14-15) – and it remained so until a little over a hundred years ago, when (like everyone else in the culture) Christians came to favour the bio-medical model of health over against traditional practices that were no longer deemed to be ‘scientific’. In the process, it turned out to be quite easy to ridicule – even to demonize – folk remedies and all sorts of energy healing.

God Language

Up to this point, I have deliberately avoided using the specific word ‘God’ – though there has been plenty of talk of the divine, divinity, spirit, and so on, in a way that could not be regarded as anything other than completely orthodox from a Christian standpoint. I did that, partly to be able to make the point that our language can be flexible while being right in the mainstream of the tradition, but also because Wiccans tend to speak rather more often of the Goddess than of God. There are all sorts of reasons why people (not just Wiccans) wish to affirm belief in the female aspects of divinity, and not surprisingly they tend to regard the Christian image of God as being incorrigibly patriarchal, with all the baggage that word carries. This might appear to be a real difference between paganism and Christianity, and of course it is if we understand Christian theology exclusively within the philosophical paradigm of ancient Greek philosophical thought. But once we move away from that, especially when we embrace a Biblical worldview, we find a surprising variety of images and metaphors used to describe and refer to the nature of the divine. Of course there is anthropomorphic imagery, which no doubt raises some other questions about the extent to which human categories can adequately describe the indescribable. But the most striking thing about this language is that, taking Christian scripture as a whole, the language of divinity is both male and female. God is portrayed as a mother who nurses and comforts us (Isaiah 66:12-13); a midwife (Psalm 22:9); a female eagle (Deuteronomy 32:11-14), a mother hen gathering in her chicks (Matthew 23:37) –

even a woman giving birth (Isaiah 42:14). Moreover, these images are not used to suggest that divinity is androgynous, because the creation story itself depicts both male and female as being ‘in the image of God’ (Genesis 1:27), which clearly suggests that the creator has both male and female characteristics, otherwise how could women and men both equally be appropriate reflections of the creator? Nor is this some newfangled understanding dreamed up in the 21st century: John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, the Venerable Bede, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Bernard of Clairvaux, Hildegard of Bingen, Anselm – and many more – used female and male language of God, while no less a person than Martin Luther offered an extended discussion of the female images applied to God, in his commentary on the book of Genesis.

While some Christians will naturally be wary when Wiccans and other pagans refer to the divine mother, or the Goddess, such usage – even when it seems shocking – invites all of us to be aware of the essentially symbolic and figurative nature of any language that may be used in relation to the divine reality. In dialogue with Wiccans, this should be one thing that Christians can bring to the table, by not hesitating to affirm the maternal images found in the Bible. We also need to be sensitive to the pain caused through the centuries by patriarchy and its abuses – while insisting that Christians are not responsible for all the ills in the world, and patriarchy is at root a human problem, not a religious one. We might also ask whether some spiritual searchers who today are opting for a matriarchal deity may eventually end up imposing their own limitations on the true nature of the cosmos and all that is in it. Wiccan beliefs tend to be somewhat vague at this point, especially when we ask about the nature and status of Goddess language – is it literal, symbolic, anthropomorphic, or something else? – or raise questions about what redemption might look like for men.

Sexuality

Not unrelated to language for God is the whole matter of sex, both in terms of gender and in relation to what people do to express their sexuality. By speaking openly of this, and regarding sexuality as a gateway to the transcendent, Wiccans have opened themselves up to all sorts of lurid accusations about orgies and so on. Here again, Christians appear to have lost sight of some significant aspects of their own tradition.

In relation, first, to gender issues, reflect on the following:

- Jesus clearly set himself against the patriarchal attitudes of his day and upheld the equality of women. He offered empowerment for them to live in a society that denigrated females, and he consistently stressed the dignity and worth of all humans irrespective of gender.
- Women and their insights lie at the heart of New Testament theology: they were the primary witnesses of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and their witness was accepted within the church even though at the time the wider culture deemed a woman’s testimony about anything to be worthless.
- The New Testament repeatedly affirms that every believer, regardless of gender, is a priest before God (1 Peter 2: 4-10), and that women exercised spiritual gifts such as prophecy (Acts 2:17, 21:9, 1 Corinthians 11:5). St Paul insisted that there is neither male nor female in Christ (Galatians 3:28), and had high regard for

women among his co-workers, to at least one of whom he applied the title of 'apostle' (Romans 16:7). Even more surprisingly, some women exercised spiritual leadership roles in the incorrigibly patriarchal age of the Hebrew scriptures (for example, Deborah, Judges 4:4; Huldah, 2 Kings 22:14).

Misogyny is still deeply entrenched in many sections of the church even today, and that fact alone explains why many women look elsewhere to find spiritual nourishment, whether in Wicca or other forms of new spirituality.

But then there is also the matter of the relationship of sexuality to spirituality. The church has a very dark history on this, sometimes insisting on celibacy as a prior requirement for any sort of meaningful divine connection, and at other times generally marginalizing and repressing anything to do with sex – or just living in denial about the human realities. Moreover, this cannot be relegated to the pages of history: it is still a central issue for many Christians today. This is another subject on which the Bible is somewhat different, for it clearly presents sex and sexual activity as a gift from God to be enjoyed within the bounds of loving relationships, and regards the body as God's handiwork, and therefore a perfectly appropriate vehicle through which to commune with the divine – something that is elaborated and celebrated in considerable intimate detail in the Song of Songs. To view the body as a prison for the spirit – as many Christians still do – has nothing to do with the Gospel, but everything to do with Platonic philosophy and Gnostic spirituality. It was the Gnostics above all who embedded patriarchy within the church, combining fear of sexuality with the marginalization of women. Wiccans understand this, and try to reverse it, regarding women's fertility as something to be affirmed, not denied. But they are not the first, or the only ones to think this way, and it is worth recalling Jesus' attitudes to this very topic when he met a woman who was marginalized for all these reasons (Matthews 9:20-22).

There are many neglected questions for Christians to address here. Why is the church so scared of female fertility? What, exactly, does it mean to be a female or male made in God's image? And what does an embodied spirituality look like?

Opposing Injustice

How do we deal with injustice? This is an important question for Wiccans and Christians, retrospectively in relation to past persecutions as well as in relation to the major issues that face us in the world today. Much of my argument so far has suggested that Christians need to reflect again on their own faith in the light of the sort of questions that pagans are now raising. But here is a question that Christians need to address to Wiccans and others like them. From what I can see – and I have spoken about this with very many people of different spiritual outlooks – no nature based pathway knows how to engage with this question. Wiccans, like other people, are concerned about the suffering we encounter on a daily basis, and many take active steps to alleviate it. But the pagan worldview *per se* has little or nothing to say to those who suffer. On the contrary, by emphasizing our inner connections with the natural world, and concentrating on that oneness which embraces all things and people, evil can so easily be domesticated in such a way that it becomes acceptable as 'just the way things are'. No amount of shamanic drumming, exploration of one's

inner self, or communion with earth divas, offers a vision of global – and ultimately cosmic – transformation. It actually tends, if anything, to reaffirm the *status quo*.

Any purely immanent form of spirituality has the same effect. It seems to me that we need a transcendent vision of the divine, alongside the immanent, if we are to make a difference. And – whether this is a sign of human weakness, or divine wisdom, or a bit of both – a belief in a personal deity draws forth in human nature the sort of resolve that is needed to challenge wrongdoing.

Conclusion

In this sense, Wicca and Christianity have similar – though distinctive – challenges to face. The challenge for Wiccans is how to avoid concluding that because something is ‘natural’ it is therefore ‘right’ – and in the process, becoming complicit by default with the very things they claim to wish to undermine, the oppression of women among them. For Christians, the challenge is how to avoid the temptations of power that inevitably arise when transcendence is identified with triumphalism and empire-building. Both groups have a long history of making both mistakes, which is why continued dialogue will – at the very least – remind us of the ease with which we lose sight of our own highest ideals, while also inviting us to reflect on which ideals might be the most inspirational for the struggles we face in being genuinely human and humane and spiritual in the face of a world that is crying out for new vision and fresh direction.

Racial Justice and Inter-faith Dialogue

Hugh Boulter

Introduction

In the late 1960s I was involved in teaching primary school children who had recently arrived from Pakistan and India. As teachers, our initial concern was to teach them English so that they could fit into ordinary school life. However, we soon realised we had to deal not only with language problems but also issues to do with racial discrimination concerning both Afro-Caribbean and Asian pupils and so we established a national teachers' group, the National Association for Multi-Racial Education (NAME).

In retrospect, however, there was one aspect of the needs of our pupils which we tended to ignore: their religious identity and the implications which this might have for their education. The late sixties were a time of marked secularism in British society and looking back I can see that many of my colleagues were hostile to the whole idea of religion, while those of us who were people of faith were slow to realise the long term implications of this.

It is partly a realisation of this failure which led me to undertake a research project at Bristol and Warwick Universities, which culminated in a PhD thesis entitled *The Spirit in Islam: A Study in Christian-Muslim Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*. In it I explored the parallels between the Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit with the Qur'anic concepts of *ruh* (Spirit) and *din al-fitrah* (natural religion). In the process of this work I became particularly interested in the nature of dialogue itself and the relationship between inter-faith dialogue and racial justice. It is this issue which I wish to address. Much of the research which I conducted was based on interviews with Muslim academics in Britain and I shall use quotations from these interviews to illustrate the points which I raise.

Two Models

I first want to introduce two models or frameworks: the first is a model of inter-faith dialogue put forward by David Lochhead, a Protestant Canadian theologian, in his book *The Dialogical Imperative*; the second is a model of racial discrimination put forward by Gordon Allport, the American sociologist in his classic work, *The Nature of Prejudice*. I shall then juxtapose the two models and raise a series of questions which I believe are relevant to the current situation in Britain today; which may suggest lines of action for both Christians and other people of faith; and which throw light on the relationship between inter-faith dialogue and racial justice

Lochhead's Model

Lochhead's model, which I have adapted slightly in the light of my research, suggests the following attitudes towards inter-faith dialogue: isolation, hostility, competition, partnership, dialogue as negotiation, dialogue proper and foreclosure. I shall briefly address each.

Isolation

Isolation has historically been the most common attitude. Partly, this is because of geographical separation but also, as in the case of Jewish communities in the Middle Ages, because they were afraid of persecution and kept to themselves as much as possible. Isolation remains a major attitude toward dialogue in Britain. As one interviewee said: 'It is a question of priority in someone's life. What is more important? To find a job? Or to be discussing with other people when you have a family to feed?' Another pointed out that, while sympathetic to dialogue in principle, the community he served as an imam was more concerned with other social issues which might include such matters as relationships between the generations, arranged marriages and mental health. Such attitudes are understandable but, as I shall try to show, not without their dangers.

Hostility

Hostility as such was not a major subject of discussion in the interviews, which were completed immediately prior to the events in the summer of 2001. However, several of those interviewed referred to hostility between Muslims and Christians in the past. In addition there were two specific references which have a bearing on the issue. First, one of the interviewees, who in all other respects was deeply sympathetic to inter-faith harmony, said, 'When imams are talking to their congregations, they are not going to be too perhaps careful about the details ... and the motives are perhaps different as well... It could be that, rather than to get understanding, it is actually to inflame and incite people to hatred really, in order to get the message across.' As we shall see, this is what Allport calls 'antilocution' and I shall return to it later. Nor am I suggesting that it is a particularly Muslim phenomenon. There is ample evidence of hostile Christian polemic but, in the light of subsequent events, few are likely to question the danger of such talk.

The second excerpt is more general: 'The [Muslim] saint can be a military saint, as was the Prophet himself. The body integrated with military prowess, integrated with spiritual austerity.' Put in another way: 'Muhammad's role as prophet and statesman, is according to the Muslim's conviction the very proof of Muhammad's unique role as God's messenger, evidencing the truth of his message. How could it be that God who sent him should not grant him ultimate success?' In the current world situation who can doubt the ability of Christian politicians to be warlike? Nonetheless, there are real issues which need to be debated by Muslims and Christians about the role of force in the world today.

Competition

Competition manifests itself most obviously over conversions, whether from Islam to Christianity or from Christianity to Islam. Many of the interviews recognised that both Christianity and Islam are missionary religions but did not go into detail about how conversions should be handled; nor did they touch on the related issue of inter-faith marriages. These are sensitive issues but at some stage they will need to be brought out into the open. However, the interviews did touch upon another related issue – salvation. There was a clear divide here between those Muslims who think that

salvation is only for Muslims and those who think it is available to other people of faith. In the latter group were the interviewees who said, 'Those who believe and do good deeds, whether they be Christian, Jew or Muslim will enter paradise.' Others take the view that Islam 'abrogates' all other religions and 'in no way does biblical Christianity remain a fully valid way of salvation after the advent of Muhammad.' As another interviewee remarked: 'Now my question to my fellow-Muslims and scholars of religion is this: "How do you understand these two [points-of-view] in today's context, in the British context?"' Another major topic for both intra-faith and inter-faith discussion.

Partnership

Partnership, what one might call the 'dialogue of action', takes place where people of different faiths work together on a common project. One interviewee mentioned work he had done in West Africa with Muslims and Christian communities. Another had been involved in Jubilee 2000. But perhaps the most marked example was in Brighton where Imam Dr Abduljalil Sajid was involved in two particularly interesting projects, which, as he pointed out, involved not only inter-faith co-operation but also intra-faith collaboration in that they brought together the various Muslim communities in that city. The first concerned racial harassment and brought together the various communities to meet with police and civil authorities to develop a co-ordinated strategy. A second issue that they worked together over was juvenile crime. Such partnership initiatives are invaluable. However, partnership is not the same as dialogue proper and I shall come onto this later.

Dialogue as Negotiation

Dialogue as negotiation is a term which Lochhead uses to describe encounters between people of different faiths, where each side simply states their particular stance on an issue and listens to the other. It is exemplified by the view of Dr Basil Mustafa of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies when he says, in answer to a question about the purpose of dialogue: 'The straightforward answer that comes to mind is a greater understanding, a better appreciation of each other's tradition and faith and hopefully that will lead to a more sort of peaceful co-existence for the betterment of the two faith communities.' The weakness of such a view, however, is highlighted by another interviewees where he says: 'Even those...Muslims and Christians who have engaged with each other in dialogue, for so many decades, it is debatable how many of them actually make authentic room for the other. I have been very disappointed.'

Dialogue Proper

Dialogue proper occurs where two parties not only exchange ideas but also in the process seek to generate new understanding. People hold very different views about this. Some, probably a minority, hold a very dynamic understanding of differences, pointing out that much religious language is highly poetical and our aim is to explore the underlying meaning so as to reach a common consensus. Others feel that they have benefited greatly from the experience. Dr Shahid Raza of the Muslim College in Ealing, where he is Secretary to the Sharia Council UK, says clearly: 'I now feel in so many respects I am a different person. I have got very different attitudes towards

other faiths and other faith communities.’ Others are more cautious and realise that some of the difficult issues will take a lot of time to explore and resolve. Dr Ataullah Siddiqui, whose contribution appears below, talked about the Christian doctrine of the Trinity: ‘It [the Trinity] may be very important for Christians. Of course it is very important for Christians and I would like time to explore that, but I need time. It will take a long time. It is difficult for Christians to understand very clearly: more difficult for Muslims to go through.’

However, even those who were most suspicious of dialogue, perceptibly changed their view during the course of their interview. Two exchanges illustrate the point nicely. At the beginning of one interview when we were discussing the Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit, my interviewee says, ‘That one question of the Spirit appears, of course, and you would not deny it, as a very Christian approach...So we are not on the same wavelength from the start.’ Later in the interview I say to him, ‘It does seem to me extremely important from a Christian point-of-view, that the theology is developed in such a way that it enables other religions to be respected and that is really what I am trying to do.’ To which he replied: ‘I think it is important. I think that talking about the Spirit as you propose to do will be one of the ways, probably a good way to do so.’ I am not suggesting that this represents a radical change but only that, if one can bring oneself into dialogue with others, it can be surprising what will emerge. If you do not dialogue, you are not even giving it a chance.

Foreclosure

However, before I go on to relate this understanding of dialogue to racial justice, there is another aspect which is outside Lochhead’s model but which emerged from the interviews themselves, and that is what I call foreclosure.

Foreclosure occurs where one or other party to the relationship seeks to pre-empt further discussion on the issue in hand rather than allow the listener to examine it in greater detail and on their own terms. It is essentially anti-dialogical. Sometimes this is entirely deliberate and legitimate in the sense that one of the parties does not wish to continue and says so clearly. However, there were two categories of foreclosure which emerged from the interviews and which need to be clarified as they can lead to misunderstandings: first, is what we might call ‘inclusive foreclosure’ and secondly ‘pluralist foreclosure’.

Inclusivist Foreclosure

Inclusivist foreclosure occurs where one party subsumes something within the other party’s revelation. For example, many Muslims consider that the revelation given by God in Jesus, while valid for its time, is overtaken by the revelation given to the Prophet Muhammad. So one interviewee can say: ‘We don’t separate between any of the prophets in the sense that they were divine messengers ... they were sinless, they were pure, they were perfect human beings.’ He then goes on to say: ‘For Muslims the life of Jesus is only what is exemplified in the Qur’an, which isn’t a lot...whereas the life of the Prophet is covered in great depth in the books of the *hadith* and other books of *sirah*.’ Theologically this occurs in Christianity in Karl Rahner’s concept of anonymous Christians whereby those of other faiths may by God’s grace achieve

salvation even though they are not aware of it. They become what Rahner calls 'anonymous Christians'. A similar concept, *din al-fitrah*, the innate quality within human beings to recognise God as creator and turn to him, occurs in Islam. Shahid Raza makes the point that *din al-fitrah* applies to all believers whether they be born into a Muslim, a Jewish, a Christian or a Hindu family. The danger of such an approach is that it seeks to include people of other faiths in a way with which they may not be at all happy and may preclude dialogue about important areas of difference. One of my other interviewees expressed his concern strongly: 'There is a real danger of paternalism or even infiltration when we hear of missionaries saying things like, "As Christians we are not interested in converting Muslims to Christianity but we want them through their religious life to discover that they are in fact part of Jesus' plan"...Don't speak like that to non-Christians. Muslims will also very often consider that everybody is Muslim just because it is *din al-fitrah* and that non-Muslims are just Muslims who ignore that they are Muslims...I think that we have to be very careful about that, cautious and respectful of the others.'

Pluralist Foreclosure

Pluralist foreclosure occurs where it is assumed that both parties share the same point-of-view but where, on closer examination, there are subtle differences. For example, one interviewee said, 'I can't actually see any moral values that we have, the Muslims have, which are different from the Christians.' In many respects this may be true but we need to recognise that we arrive at such a point by very different means. Ataulah Siddiqui says very clearly: 'Let us begin by stating that "Islamic Ethics" is a discipline which does not exist.' There is not space here to go into this in detail but suffice it to say that Islam has a 'divine command ethic' which draws directly on the Qur'an and other holy writings so that interpretation becomes a matter of law or *fiqh* whereas contemporary Christian ethics are the result of a continuing debate within the church and with secular society. The point I wish to make here is that these very differences between the two systems are precisely the sort of area where we should be having dialogue, and arguing that we are all agreed on a certain issue does not really move us forward. In other words, effective dialogue takes place where we look at the differences not the supposed similarities. This insight is key.

Allport's Model of Racial Prejudice

I come now to Gordon Allport's model of racial prejudice which he first published in 1954. In it he suggests that there is a potential downward progression from antilocution to avoidance to discrimination to physical attack to extermination. Allport's original work largely concerned prejudice by powerful white in-groups against blacks and Jews in the United States. He looks at the situation from the point-of-view of the damage done by powerful in-groups against weaker out-groups. He does not claim that one stage automatically leads to the next but does argue that, for example, where there is discrimination it is preceded by avoidance and antilocution.

What I want to do is to place Allport's model next to Lochhead's model and raise a number of questions which I think will help us to understand the relationship between inter-faith dialogue and racial justice. I have already mentioned antilocution where one group makes derogatory or inflammatory comments about another. I do not propose to enter into the current debate about the need for legislation but I do suggest

that all people of faith should be careful about what they say and write about other religions. I also want to suggest that antilocution can take place not only by in-groups against out-groups but also vice versa. In other words it can easily become mutual.

In such situations it is hardly surprising if the two groups which are being derogatory about each other then start to avoid each other and reach a situation which Allport calls avoidance and which Lochhead calls isolation. Nor, I would suggest, does antilocution necessarily precede isolation. May it not be that antilocution can arise out of isolation, almost as a self-justification? However, where two groups are isolated from each other and are being derogatory about each other, it is not surprising that discrimination takes place whether that be to do with employment, education, housing, religion or equality before the law – the five main categories which Allport identifies. And once we have a cocktail of antilocution, isolation and discrimination there is always the danger of violence irrupting as was seen in the summer of 2001 and has been seen in the London bombings of July 7th 2005 and more recently in the Lozells area of Birmingham.

I do not wish here to debate the value or otherwise of current proposed legislation about incitement to religious hatred; nor do I wish to underestimate the value of existing legislation against racial discrimination. But if my analysis, following Allport, is correct discrimination is already three steps down the ladder towards violence and we will not seriously address the problems unless we deal also with communal isolation and antilocution.

Multi-culturalism, Integration and Dialogue

I am not a keen advocate of the terms multi-culturalism or integration. Multi-culturalism can too easily imply separate cultures living side by side which in turn can imply the very isolation which I am questioning. Conversely, integration can imply a subsuming of one culture into another and a subsequent loss of identity. Rather I am suggesting a much more constructive and perhaps more difficult model in which different communities engage with each other and create new understandings and new ways of living together in mutual understanding. This will require serious dialogue on serious issues of common concern. It will also imply a parity of esteem by the different communities, each for the other.

Interestingly an article in *The Psychologist* in 2003, which refers to Allport's work and analyses a range of subsidiary studies using his model, comes to the conclusion that inter-group activity has a major role in reducing prejudice and avoiding a downwards spiral from isolation/avoidance to discrimination and violence. It also refers specifically to the riots in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham in 2001 and suggests that a failure in group contact was a major factor in their taking place. It is this lack of group contact which Trevor Phillips was speaking so forcibly against in a much publicised speech which he gave to the Manchester Council for Community Relations in 2005. He foresees the increasing growth of racial and religious ghettos, particularly in relation to housing and schooling, unless we do something about it. In general I share his views, although I think he underplays the importance of religious identity in relation to community isolation.

Religion and Communal Identity

It is all very well encouraging Summer Camps, joint sporting activities and improved schooling policies, all of which I endorse, but we need to take much more seriously the relationship between religion and communal identity. Secular society tends to be ambivalent about this issue and it is here that Christians have an important role to play. As people of faith, Christians share a common ground with other people of faith – at least we believe in something other than the purely material world. In the summer of 2005 the General Synod of the Church of England endorsed a report entitled *Presence and Engagement: the churches' task in a multi Faith society*. It suggests that Christians have a responsibility to be a presence in society and to engage with those within it whether of other faiths or none. Those of us who have served as members of ODCIC have, over the last ten years or so, often been invited to deanery synods, parishes and other groups throughout the Diocese to talk about our work. A recurring comment in discussion is, 'How can we have dialogue with those of other faiths or none, when we have not learned how to articulate our own Christian belief and experience of God?' It is a serious weakness which the churches need to address.

Conclusion

To return to my initial questions about the religious identity of pupils and the relationship between inter-faith dialogue and racial justice: it seems to me that if antilocution and communal isolation can lead to discrimination and violence, the antidote to communal isolation is the dialogue of action where communities, which are differentiated by race and/or religion, need to identify and work together on common problems. The antidote to antilocution is dialogue proper whereby the different communities discuss openly the issues which divide them, whether they be religious or cultural, and will include such sensitive topics as conversions, salvation, marriage customs, dietary restrictions, dress codes and blasphemy. And in terms of children's religious identity we must give them the opportunity not only to express their own religious feelings, loyalties and experiences but also to listen sympathetically to the religious views and experiences of others. As Christians, we need to create situations in which we can listen to the views and experiences of others, but we also need to be equipped to voice our own understanding and experience of the Christian faith. It is in this process of dialogue that different communities and different faith groups can, in an atmosphere of parity of esteem, develop new understandings of what it means to live together. This is the connection between racial justice and inter-faith dialogue.

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Christian-Muslim Dialogue – A Christian View

Anthony O'Mahony

I

In this reflection I wish to give a context to Christian-Muslim relations as we experience them today. I will also look at the theological difference and challenges which are foundational to the encounter between Christianity and Islam. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his book, 'The Dignity of Difference', stated that the 20th Century had been a century of ideology but that the 21st Century would be a century of identity. If that is true then how Christians and Muslims understand their identity and also how they relate to each other will be of key significance.

We experience Christian-Muslim engagement at many levels: theological, political, cultural and global. Today looking at the world as a whole, Christians and Muslims make up over half of the global population. Statistics are almost inevitably estimates, but Christians make-up 33 per cent (approximately 2 billion) and Muslims 18 per cent (1.3 billion).

Christian-Muslim relations increasingly must be set within a context of global religious resurgence. This religious-political context is opening up dynamic encounters, which go far beyond the classic historic relationship between Europe and Islam across the Mediterranean or in the Balkans. It also goes substantially beyond the European discussion on the relationship between church and state, and religion and politics in the public square.

Today Christian-Muslim relations take place in a multiplicity of contexts. In the Middle East, whilst overwhelmingly Muslim, there are significant Christian communities in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, which were present some six hundred years before the arrival of Islam. The Middle East is the historic homeland of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Jerusalem is central to Jewish and Christian religious identity and is of importance in Islam. The Eastern (Orthodox) Christian experience of living with Islam in the Middle East is of great importance for the global Christian tradition by widening and giving historical maturity to its religious encounter with Islam.

In Africa large numbers of Christians and Muslims are found in the four regions West, East, Central and Southern Africa. Africa is also a continent associated with ancient Christianity – Egypt, Nubia (Sudan) and Ethiopia. In Asia – large parts of Asia are Muslim, with the world's largest Muslim nation (Indonesia), located in Southeast Asia, and large populations in both Central and South Asia (Pakistan, India and Bangladesh). By contrast, only one Asian nation, the Philippines, has a Christian majority population. Christians and Muslims live as minorities in 'Hindu' India. In the West, Muslims are a minority in all countries, although it has been noted that the most significant religious change in Europe since the Reformation is the growth of the

Muslim community outside its area of settlement in the Balkans, which occurred during the Ottoman period.

The nature of Christian-Muslim relations in various states is also determining the scope of international relations and alliances. We increasingly see external Islamic finance being given to local and regional Muslim groups to aid development politically and materially, particularly in Africa and Asia, so that Islam has a more powerful and higher profile in relation to political culture than previously. This can be in the funding of Muslim political movements, the building of Mosques and the funding of Da'wa/Mission. In Western European states, and increasingly in North America, religious and cultural Da'wa/Mission are particularly strong themes.

Another important development is how Christianity and Islam are emerging as trans-national forces. Religions are speaking directly to each other - not necessarily through traditional nation states or the United Nations but with each other. An example of this is the Holy See. Since the late John Paul II was elected in 1978 as the Pontiff we have seen an exponential growth of Muslim state diplomatic representation at the Vatican. Most Muslim states which belong to the Organisation of Islamic States, have some form of diplomatic representation at the Holy See. A further example of this was the funeral in Rome in 2005 of John Paul II which brought together religious and political leaders who would not have encountered each other before - the Presidents of the State of Israel and the Islamic Republic of Iran for example. The religions are speaking with each other across the world in a whole variety of ways. Another example is the Anglican Church's relationship, which includes scholarly and student exchange, with the oldest seat of Islamic learning, the al-Azhar in Egypt. The Church of England has undertaken a dialogue with the Sunni world as part this global process of religion speaking to religion.

Other religious contexts are informing Christian-Muslim relations: the conflict between China and Islam, at home and abroad; the Thai 'Buddhist' state and the Muslim minority in the south of the country; Hindu-Muslim relations in South Asia; Jewish-Muslim religious discussions, which may have important theological implications for Christianity. The significance of the scale and importance of the Christian-Muslim engagement is not lost on other faiths, so we are finding other traditions, particularly Judaism, but also Hinduism and Buddhism taking an increasingly active interest in the dialogue between Christianity and Islam.

We also witness a reconfiguration of Christian-Muslim relations in Russia. In the West we have little understanding of the political and religious encounter between the Eastern Orthodox Churches and Islam, as majorities in Russia and some Balkan states, or as minorities in the Middle East, such as the Patriarchates of Antioch, Constantinople, Alexandria or Jerusalem. Also, in the West, we generally have little knowledge and understanding of the Oriental Churches - Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, Syrian - and their contribution to understanding the Islamic tradition that they have experienced historically over many centuries. In order to exhibit a more robust historical and theological reflection of the Christian-Muslim encounter, churches of the West must expand their 'canon' of knowledge, experience and understanding.

We also notice a growth in trans-national ideology. I might mention here the influential thought of Sayyid Qutb, the radical Islamist and Sunni thinker from Egypt, traces of whose thinking can be found across the Muslim world. For example, his wish to delegitimise states governed by non-Islamist Muslims; to focus on the eternal combat between Christians and Muslims as found in the Qur'anic exegesis on their early relationship; to continue to see Islamic identity related to the abrogation of the Christian tradition; and to see the State of Israel, as a modern reflection of the Jewish rejection of Muhammad in the seventh century, and the early Muslim overthrowing or destruction of the Jewish community in Medina, which led the way to the establishment of the first Islamic state, as a parallel for today. The seventh century 'Constitution of Medina', which seems to allow for a degree of religious freedom for non-Muslims, is also put forward as the correct relationship of Muslims to Jewish and Christian believers, by both radical Islamists and 'moderate' Muslims.

II

Christians experience Islam as a religious and theological challenge. Since the earliest period in its history, the Islamic tradition has been conscious of the religious diversity of the human race and considered it an issue of importance. Muslim tradition maintains that the diversity of religions has been the hallmark of human society for a very long time, but it had not been its primordial condition. Islam sees itself as the natal religion of humanity, thus abrogating all other traditions.

We can learn from this that according to the Islamic tradition Islam is not only the historical religion and institutional framework, which was brought into existence by the Muslim prophet Muhammad in the seventh century, it is also the primordial religion of mankind, revealed to Adam at the time of his creation. This is intimately related to the conception that Adam was a prophet, and to the notion that Ibrahim/Abraham was a Muslim in a meta-historical sense.

At a certain stage in their development, however, Islam claims that Judaism and Christianity deviated from their pristine condition and became hopelessly corrupt. A prophetic mission would have been required to ameliorate this situation. However, no prophets were sent to accomplish this task between the missions of Jesus and Muhammad and, consequently, true religion ceased to exist. Only with the emergence of Islam in the seventh century, was the situation transformed. Not only is Islam different from Christianity, many Muslims see it as positively abrogating Christianity. Muhammad is the 'seal of prophets'; the revelation accorded to him supersedes all that came before.

Two things are very clear in the Qur'anic view: the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation are wrong and in propounding them Christians go to excess, or go beyond the bounds of the truth in their religious confession. From the Qur'an's perspective the exaggeration consists in saying more about God and about Jesus than the truth in the scriptures warrants one to say about Him. In a recent study, *The Muslim Jesus; Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* the Muslim scholar Tarif Khalidi has written, "Jesus is a controversial prophet. He is the only prophet in the Qur'an who is deliberately made to distance himself from the doctrines that his community is said to hold of him."

It is thus that we locate the challenge of Islam, not just as a historical encounter, which is of importance; or as a political force in the modern world; but also as a theological challenge. There is an intimacy to the Christian-Muslim encounter, which offers a familiarity, but allows for no sentimentality. Within the long history of polemics between Muslims and Christians, the most persistent Christian response to the assertion of abrogation has been a straightforward rejection of how Muslims understand Christianity. Christian apologists have repeatedly insisted that the Qur'anic and post-Qur'anic comprehension of Christian doctrine is seriously flawed. The conflict centres on three issues: the reality of Jesus' crucifixion and death; the doctrine of the incarnation; and the Christian understanding of God as Trinity. The Qur'anic accounts of all three of these, as well as subsequent interpretations and elaborations, stand in sharp contrast with mainstream Christian understanding. Throughout the centuries since the rise of Islam, Muslim-Christian relations have revolved round the double axis of the familiar, the biblical appeal, and the extraneous religious critique.

III

Christian-Muslim encounters are located in history. There are many different types of forces at work here. There is a misplaced temptation to look back in history to find moments of tolerance and conviviality. For example, the many 'historical' presentations of medieval Spain when Jews, Christians and Muslims lived face to face; or the religious condition of the Ottoman Empire without mentioning the Armenian genocide. One Jewish historian of Islam, Yohannan Friedmann, in his book *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* wrote: 'For Christians and Muslims alike, tolerance is the new virtue and intolerance is the new crime.' What he is saying is that there is a temptation in Muslim-Christian relations to accept how Muslims and Christians are imagined to have encountered each other historically and to rework that into our contemporary context.

I mention this point because Christian-Muslim relations are located in history and they have a historical context and that is important. Hence it is doubly important to get the historical record correct. Modern interreligious dialogue and understanding should not depend on glowing but questionable descriptions of religious tolerance in the middle ages; they should emerge from autonomous decisions of contemporary believers. Muslims and Christians in the interreligious encounter need to bring their traditions to bear on the great contemporary issues. This requires of them a decision to do so and then to bring the whole of their theological resources to that discussion. Muslims and Christians can either decide to encounter each other in a conflictual way or decide that, within their resources, within their experience, they can take other paths. At this point it must be said that the scale and diversity of the Christian-Muslim encounter does not lead itself easily to this possibility. However it is a sign of the times that these two notions of radical reaction and radical dialogue have emerged simultaneously.

Theology is very important here. Christians, when they encounter Islam, encounter it as a theological tradition, as a world of difference. Christians come face to face with familiar images, but with different understandings of Christology, the role of Jesus as prophet who points the way to Muhammad in the Islamic tradition, and a view that their scripture has been corrupted. One of the great religious questions that

Christianity continues to pose to Islam, as a tradition, is: does the understanding that Islam has of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, found in the Qur'an and some aspects of the Islamic tradition, binding on the Muslim community today or is there space for some doctrinal development or theological growth?

I shall finish now but really I want to argue that Muslim-Christian relationships take place in many different spheres. It's a historic one; we can locate it globally in its political context, but we can also try to locate it theologically. There are great challenges right across the board and because it is of great importance, because of the size of the Muslim and Christian communities, because they live on such a global scale, what we do and think about each other is important.

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Christian-Muslim Relations: Perceptions and Perspectives

Ataullah Siddiqui

I would like to explore, very briefly, two broad questions of the relationship between Christians and Muslims. One, whether there has been a significant impact of socio-political changes, where Muslims were in ascendancy and Christians found themselves in a minority. And whether, at times of political crisis, Muslim theologians and jurists interpreted Islam too narrowly in relation to their minorities in general and the Christian minority in particular. Second, what impact such interpretations have today on Muslims in general, and relations between the two communities in particular, against the backdrop of socio-economic and military supremacy of Christian countries of the West. And what kind of legacies it will leave for the future.

Answers to such questions need time and energy. However I will explore the relationship only from the medieval period onwards. We will skip the Prophetic period and the period of Rashidun (Rightly guided [first four] Caliphs) – the time when the Muslims were seen at the fringe of Christianity and described - e.g. by John of Damascus - as the Ishmaelites. Islam saw Christians as part of their extended heritage and part of that wider Muslim family.

The Mediaeval Period

I will begin with the Andalusian experience and the Crusades. While on the one hand the Andalusian experience was one of the best examples of religious harmony in Europe, nonetheless it hid the intense frustration of many Christian minorities who regarded the Muslim domination over them with utter contempt. The Ninth/Tenth Century Spanish Martyrs' Movement is one such example. Muslim theologians reacted with derision. Perhaps this was the beginning of intense mistrust and polemical engagement. I will take first Ibn Hazm (d. 1002). His book *al-Fasl fi al-Milal wa al-Ahwa wa al-Nihal* (the decisive word on sects, heterodoxies and denominations). He argues that the essence of humanity, religious experiences and their expressions cannot be mutually contradictory or essentially different. He finds Christianity stands against this view and he finds it self-contradictory. That irrelevance of Christianity and its belief to the wider society still exists amongst Muslims. Though Ibn Hazm influenced subsequent generations of Muslims, he was not very popular during his life time. Religious scholars were always in confrontation with him; rather he was against the religious leadership of the time.

Opposite to Ibn Hazam's tradition we find Al-Ghazali (d. 1111). He highlighted that there are different kinds of seekers of Truth. Scholastic theologians – who follow theory and speculation; the philosophers – who rely upon formal logic; and the Sufis – possessors of intuition and knowledge of the truth by means of ecstasy. He took Christianity and Christians in a different light from Ibn Hazam. He explores Christian thought from its self-understanding and in *Al-Radd al-jamil* - the authorship is attributed to him - he urges Muslims that in the Bible the texts that imply the divinity of Jesus should be understood allegorically and the texts that imply his humanity should be taken literally. Christianity, he believes has been corrupted [*tahrif* – a

Qur'anic charge against the Gospels] by pagan philosophy. Although he never takes the Gospels as revealed texts none the less he encourages Muslims to take Christianity seriously. We do not know when he wrote this book but the impact of the Crusades, as we find in later Muslim scholars, were not reflected in his writings.

While great cultural exchanges were taking place between Islam and Latin Christian traditions, especially the philosophical debates and ideas, that were so personified in people like Ibn Sina (d.1037) and Ibn Rushd (d.1198) commonly known in the west as Avicenna and Averroes, the Mongol invasion of Baghdad in 1250 changed all. The impact of the Crusades also changed the tone and temper of Muslim scholars. When Muslims territories were attacked by the Mongols, the minorities who lived in these territories sided with the Mongols, and conspired against the Muslims. They were seen as conspirators. The theology of Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) was predominantly occupied with such events. He regarded the *dhimmi* – the minority in a Muslim country – as untrustworthy and the whole question of how to absorb them as the priority. In 1293, a Christian cleric 'Assaf al-Nasrani, was accused of insulting the Prophet. He sought protection from one of the powerful families of Damascus, but Ibn Taymiyyah brought the case before the Governor. His opinion on such issues was that anyone defaming a prophet [any prophet] *must* be executed whether a Muslim or not. This punishment was not something a judge could commute or give lesser punishment; rather in his view, it was an obligatory punishment where judges have no choice. Despite this Ibn Taymiyyah was a man of principles and this was vindicated when Damascus fell to the Mongols and both Christians and Muslims were imprisoned. The Mongols left a governor in-charge of the city. Ibn Taymiyyah negotiated the release of all prisoners of war. However, the Mongols agreed to release only the Muslim prisoners and not the Jews or Christians. This was unacceptable to Ibn Taymiyyah and he declined to leave without them.

Ibn Taymiyyah's approach to Christianity has to be understood not only against the backdrop of Mongol invasion, but also the betrayal of some Muslim groups by Muslims. He was eager to protect the future of the Muslim community on a strong theologically orthodox grounding which came to shape his views of Christianity as well. *Al-Jawab al-Sahih* [See the translation of the book by Thomas Michel, *A Muslim Theologian's Response to Christianity*], a book that was written in response to Paul of Antioch's [the Bishop of Saida] *Letters to a Muslim*. The Bishop's emphasis was to highlight how Islam is irrelevant and superfluous to Christianity. In response Ibn Taymiyyah defended the Muslim position such as the Nature of Prophet Muhammad, the corruption of Christian Scripture, and the question of *hulul* – the indwelling of God in Christ - and *ittihad* – the union of God with a creature.

The Colonial Period

During the Colonial period Christian missionaries, perhaps unconsciously, believed that the increasing westernisation of the Muslim world might speed up its Christianisation. The new educational projects amongst Muslims, concerns for Muslim women and their 'emancipation', and the increasing numbers of western educated elite amongst Muslims, were seen as steps in the right direction. But these very measures made Muslims suspicious of Christianity. They saw in them an expansionist arm of westernisation. Furthermore the colonial education policies amongst Muslims created three different approaches to colonisation. First, there was

the approach of the traditionalists, who put a strong emphasis on the preservation of traditions and traditional knowledge. Though they have rendered a great service to the community by preserving religious knowledge, they unfortunately over-emphasised preservation. The engagement and contextualisation aspects were almost lost. The second approach could be called the modernist approach. This approach interpreted Islam so that it could be more appealing to the modern world and neglected the traditions and even opposed it vigorously - e.g. in Turkey. The tension between the two in the areas of education was clear. The *madrassa*-educated group became the vanguard for protecting Muslim society from the influence of growing westernisation, but by doing so they stifled debate about Islam and its relevance to society. University and college graduates attuned to the western, modern education system gained a kind of respectability in Muslim society. However in the process they lost contact with the wider Islamic heritage. Although there has been an attempt to create a synthesis of the two – connecting the past with the present and present with the past – it is not an easy task. Against this background Christians and Muslims conducted their affairs with a polemical attitude. The debates between Karl Pfander (d.1865) and Rahmatullah Kairanwai (d. 1890) are one such example. However there were others who looked at the possibility of engagement with Christians – for example Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d.1898) and his book *Tabyin al-kalam fi tafsir al-tawrat wal-injil ala millat al-islam* (Theological clarification on the subject of the exegesis of the Old and New Testament in relation to the community of Islam). In English this book appeared as *The Mohammedan Commentary on the Holy Bible*. The purpose seems to be that Muslims should see the Bible beyond polemical or apologetic debate. In his approach he differentiates between the *wahy* given to the Prophet Muhammad and the *wahy* given to the Prophets before him. The Qur'an he states is literally dictated and Allah is the One who dictated it and hence the miracle of the language. The Prophets before Muhammad, by contrast, received only the contents of the Revelation that they rendered into their own language. In some cases 'special text' (*matan khas*) was revealed and so not all the words are divine. In such cases the prophet of that nation made 'elaboration' (*riwaya*).

Post Second World War

Now, after the Second World War there was an eagerness to engage from both the Christian and Muslim sides: to meet and talk. Christians were largely motivated by the issue of mission on the one hand, and the opening-up of new avenues in relation to people of other faiths on the other. Though this opening up process was part of a missionary understanding of the new world where Christians found themselves, it also had both theological and missiological implications for the Christian world. The Churches began to reflect afresh on the issues of mission and their relation with people of other faiths and the Churches in non-Western countries. They were facing a new challenge particularly in newly emerging countries where they were seen by their fellow citizens as a legacy of the Western colonisation. Though this period was difficult for many Christians in such countries, they nonetheless became more innovative, dynamic and began to reassert themselves in society. The Muslims on the other hand, particularly after World War II, faced a triple jeopardy. Firstly, there was an urgency to re-connect their past with their rapturous present. Secondly, the euphoria of gaining independence from their colonial rulers was short lived. The new breed of rulers, influenced by the slogans of nationalism and socialism became increasingly influential factors in Muslim states. Parties, ideologies and families,

dominated the national character and the people were hardly ever consulted. They were frustrated at being kept away from any meaningful decision making process. They were unable to make choices for themselves in socio-political affairs and they were equally restricted in their religious affairs in public. Such a situation did not help them face the new challenges they were confronted with. Thirdly, a large number of people, mainly Muslims, were either displaced refugees or economic migrants and had little time to rethink, readjust and reconnect with their past heritage. At this juncture, a call for a new relationship between Muslims and Christians was made. Muslims in general and *ulama* in particular saw the Churches as an ally in their struggle against materialism and socialism on the one hand, and injustice of any kind, particularly against the Palestinians, on the other. They saw the dialogue between the two faith communities as a dialogue of 'common cause'. At Bhamdoun in Lebanon, (22-27 April 1954) they participated in both its preparatory meetings and in the Convocation. This Convocation, as expected, was dominated by the participants' concerns about the tightening grip of materialism and the growing influence of socialism. Western educated Muslims and the *ulama* all participated enthusiastically. The creation of the State of Israel, in 1948, resulted in the displacement of thousands of Palestinians. A large number of these took refuge in neighbouring countries such as Jordan, Syria and in Lebanon and the Bahamdoun Convocation was bound to reflect these concerns. Muslim participants hoped that through such Convocations they would be able to win the hearts and minds of the Western Churches, if not Western governments. As there were a significant number of Christians amongst these refugees, they hoped that Western Churches would be more willing to co-operate with Muslims on the issue of justice. This Convocation makes it clear that Muslims expected an existential relationship; that is, they were not especially concerned about theological issues. The emphasis was more on the *people of faith* rather than the *faith of the people*.

Although theology may not be the centre of Christian-Muslim relations, nonetheless there are several Muslim scholars who have engaged constructively with theological issues. Syyed Hossein Nasr is one such scholar. He suggests that '...religions are not different "entities" but the different ways within the context of a different religious universe. All traditional religions are speaking of the same reality but with different languages.' He has his way of comparing and contrasting Islam and Christianity. For example, revelation, he argues should not be compared book with book and prophet with prophet. Comparison rather lies between the Qur'an and the Christ. 'The Word of God in Islam is the Qur'an, in Christianity it is Christ. The vehicle of the Divine Message in Christianity is the Virgin Mary, in Islam it is the soul of the Prophet. The Prophet must be unlettered for the same reason that the Virgin Mary must be virgin. The human vehicle of a Divine Message must be pure and untainted.'

Mahmoud Ayoub, another Muslim scholar, reminds us that the Qur'anic Christology, the Christology of a human Christ, needs to be taken seriously in its own right. Equally he challenges Muslims that they need to shift the whole argument about Christ from the historical domain to the theological one. He points out that the Qur'anic verse 4:157 has been taken up by the commentators of the Qur'an as a 'historical statement'; rather in his view this should be examined from a theological perspective. He also examines the terms *Ibn* and *walad* in the Qur'an. The former has been used in the Qur'an as 'son', which Ayoub argues signifies 'filial relationship', understood 'metaphorically to mean son through a relationship of love and adoption.'

Walad on the other hand refers to the more intense relationship of ‘offspring’ and this Ayoub stress signifies ‘physical generation and sonship’. Here he finds the Qur’anic commentators took the latter term and advance their arguments against the Christian concept of Christ’s divine sonship. While these two examples are enough to highlight the contemporary debate that is taking place within the Islamic understanding of Christianity, they by no means provide the full picture.

Today

Today Muslims, particularly in the Muslim world, feel that they are politically and economically under siege. After the Bosnian crisis, the Gulf crisis, Iraq, Afghanistan, Bali, Madrid, 9/11 and 7/7, Muslims do not know which way to turn. They see an all-accusing finger pointing at them and their response is to look inward. They see blatantly double standards applied against them. In many Muslim minds Christianity and the West are the same and an attack on Muslim countries by the West is also seen as an attack by Christians. This perception is further compounded by the American Evangelical and the Christian Zionist interpretation of the events in the Middle East. In situations like this it is natural to look inwards to a religious viewpoint that provides more ‘comfort’ zones for them. Therefore the interpretation of Christianity by Ibn Taymiyyah becomes more relevant and his exposition gains more weight.

But my concern is, given the socio-economic situation of Muslims and Christians, which includes the western political powers, what impact it will have on future relations between Christians and Muslims. The investment of mistrust will have a far reaching influence on the coming generations of Muslims and Christians, especially in the Muslim world. We only hope that the large protest rallies against the war(s) and the increasing engagement of Muslims and Christians in European and North American countries (as well as in other parts of the Muslim world) may reduce the impact, even though there is no guarantee that it will bear the desired result. The 1950s engagement between the two communities that perceived a common threat, like Communism, is taken over by the perception that a partner in dialogue is a suspect of crime.

Resources

There are enough resources within Islam to rediscover the Prophetic tradition that considers both Christians and Muslims as part of an extended family. But how it will work out remains to be seen. The current polemical spiral that perpetuates some Muslim and some Christian literature gives little room for hope. The current political climate does not encourage us to engage in dialogue either. But in the midst of these there is hope and I would like to give one example from the Prophet’s life. The king of Abyssinia, the Negus or Najashi, was a Christian and was known for his generosity and kindness. When the nascent Muslim community faced persecution in Makkah, the Prophet encouraged his followers to take refuge in Abyssinia and these qualities of the king were highlighted by the Prophet. Gradually, in small numbers, Muslims began to arrive in Abyssinia and some of them interacted with the larger community and lived as a minority amongst the Christian majority. The Abyssinians however tried to win over the king with gifts and persuasion so that he would hand over to them these ‘bandits’ and ‘culprits’ of their society. The king refused and gave the refugees all the help they needed. However another opportunity arose to persuade the

king. Two years after the migration of the Prophet to Madinah, the warlords of Makkah attacked Madinah but lost the battle. Fresh from defeat, they again asked the Negus to hand over the refugees who were still unable to join the Muslim community in Madinah. When the Prophet came to know about the intention of the Makkans he decided to send an envoy to Negus and chose 'Amar ibn Umaiyah ad-Damariy – a Christian. It may be said that this was political pragmatism on the part of the Prophet. However, it does not diminish the fact that people who were not Muslims were considered as partners within society and contributed significantly. This notion of partnership, I believe, needs to be rediscovered. People with their affiliation to other faiths did not disqualify themselves from being part of a society where Islam was dominant or vice versa. The Negus died a few years after this incident. When the news reached the Prophet he told his Companions that their brother had died, and that they should pray for him. He performed a special prayer which meant that the Negus died as a Muslim. But no one saw the Negus praying as a Muslim, nor did he fast during the month of Ramadan as Muslims did. Throughout his life he remained a Christian and was known as generous and just.

The challenge, and I believe it is a very important one, is how are we to meet the other person as he or she really is? Have we explored the otherness of the other, as Stanley Samartha has pointed out in his writing? To explore the other person, as he or she is, is an important duty today. I find this a very challenging path. When my Muslim friends say, 'Christians are so and so because I know so because the Qur'an says so', it is not enough. That is a Muslim view. Can we meet Christians as they are? As they believe?

Recently I had an interesting experience in the chaplaincy courses we run at Markfield. This chaplaincy course is very new for Muslims. Can we take help from Christians? Let the Christian be our partner in teaching Muslim imams. It was a novel idea. Our advisory board for chaplaincy consists of half Christians and half Muslims. They are not only an advisory board, they are also teachers and they assess our students, who are all Muslims. Our students have to spend 60 hours under another chaplain for their practice. Believe me, for many *ulama*, many religious scholars, this is the first experience in twenty or thirty years of spending so much time with other faith communities. We invite members of the Jewish community, Hindus, Buddhists, to come and meet and be trained here, because chaplaincy is not just a Muslim concern, it is a wider social concern. In all social issues we have responsibilities as Muslims to share this work. On many occasions imams come to me and say, 'I thought this chaplaincy course would be one of those things where I would come and go, but I never believed it would be a life changing experience.' I think these things that we need to do over a period of time are a real challenge but there are some good things happening here and there and I hope we can develop them.

References and Notes

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Notes on contributors

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