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A table of contents for *Christian Graduate* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_christian-graduate_01.php

UCCF Office Move

Members of the UCCF Associates will have been aware for some time that the UCCF has been planning to move its office from Central London to Leicester in May of this year. We announced in March that suitable office accommodation had been found. It only remains to say that all mail after 17 May 1976 should be addressed to:

UCCF
38 De Montfort Street
Leicester
LE1 7GP

We should be grateful if you could help us by making this change as widely known as possible.

The Christian approach to Islam

Michael Nazir-Ali

The Spring of 1976 has seen the launching in Britain of the 'World of Islam' Festival. Designed to last three months, the Festival claims to be an opportunity 'to counter the distorted picture of Islam and the Muslim world' and 'the ignorance and prejudice that have characterized the Western approach to Islam'. One of its main aims is 'the desire to present Islam from the Islamic viewpoint, and to reveal to Western man the true nature of Islam and the principles of Islamic teaching'.

We do not question Islam's right to propagate its teaching in the democratic countries of the West. But we do ask whether Western Christians understand Islam, what it is, what are its aims. We take the opportunity, therefore, to publish this paper, delivered to a conference at the London Bible College in January.

THE Christian church has always been engaged in dialogue and/or polemic with Islam. The eighth-century church father St John of Damascus wrote two disputations against the Saracens. He himself lived under Muslim rule and had indeed served in high office under Muslim rulers. Following closely on his heels was the Nestorian patriarch Timothy, who offered a Christian apology to the Caliph Mahdi. Sweetman lists

eight Christian apologists between the seventh and eleventh centuries.¹ Confrontation took place in such far-away places as the Mongol Empire in China.² Despite these early contacts it must be emphasized that very few conversions took place; most of the discussion went on in a fairly rarefied atmosphere and hardly touched the common people. Within the confines of the Islamic empire it was forbidden to evangelize the Muslims and so the oriental churches concentrated on survival rather than expansion.

Thus the situation became fairly static until the modern missionary movement began from the West. It is easy to criticize the oriental Christians for being 'dead', *etc.*, but it must be urged that, without the context provided by nineteenth-century imperialism, missionaries from the West could hardly have begun their enterprise. Muslims are deeply suspicious of mission and regard it as an appendage to the Crusades! They seem to think that the Christian 'West' must think, 'If not by conquest, then by persuasion.' Even with the imperial 'umbrella' missionaries have had very limited success in the central Islamic lands. However, in recent times the ancient churches of the East seem to be reviving from their slumber and in many cases there is a fruitful exchange of evangelists from one Muslim country to another.

This type of person is more acceptable to the host church and the host government, because cultural domination is not feared.

Many ways have been tried to evangelize the Muslim world; some of them are conciliatory, others are highly polemical. How should one evangelize the Muslim? The answer to this is that we must be biblical in our approach. Why? Because (a) the Bible tells us how to behave towards God and man and is, in short, our rule-book, and (b) because the story of evangelism in the Bible is a very successful story. Our foundation must be biblical, our disposition must be loving and our intellectual position must be honest.

Basic assumptions

The presuppositions we start with are very important so far as the development of dialogue is concerned. If one starts with the assumption that Allah is an idol, Muhammad is Antichrist, *etc.*, then one's relationship with one's Muslim neighbour is likely to be distant at best and hostile at worst. One's first basic assumption therefore should be that the Christian and the Muslim are talking about the same God. Their standpoint is different, their emphases are different and their understanding of God's attributes is different. Nevertheless it is quite clear historically that the Muslim concept of God is continuous with the Judaeo-Christian concept. The Qur'an is quite explicit in this claim: 'We believe in Allah and that which was sent down on us and that which was sent down on Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes (of Israel) and that which was given to Moses and to Jesus and that which was given to all the prophets from their Lord. We do not discriminate between any of them and to Him (*i.e.* to Allah) we have surrendered' (II: 137).

Even if it were not so, it is quite clear that the early Christians adopted *theos* for God from their pagan Hellenistic environs and the Western church later adopted *deus* from the pagan Roman usage. It is true that the early Christians did not identify their God with the Greek or Roman pantheon, but this was primarily due to the polytheistic character of Greek and Roman religion. Paul, in Acts 17, has no hesitation in using the Greek poets' (who were regarded as inspired) praise of God as they understood Him!

However, it should be made plain that one is *starting* with Islam's idea of God, not *finishing up* with it! The task of the evangelist is to develop on this view of God.

The second basic assumption is that, in addition to the Bible, the Christian will use the Qur'an and other Islamic literature to press home his argument. The Qur'an contains much that is useful and we must not reject it *in toto*. On the other hand it has much that is of doubtful value and therefore it must be used with discrimination. We have already seen that Paul was not afraid to quote from what may be called pagan

'scripture' when the occasion demanded (Acts 17: 28; Tit. 1: 12).

The third basic assumption is that we should treat belief in one God as a *preparatio evangelica*, *i.e.* the Muslim belief is to be considered an advance on mere paganism and polytheism. What precisely is meant by *preparatio evangelica*? The answer comes surprisingly from an Urdu verse of Maulana Altaf Husain Hali: 'The Hindu discovered Thy glory in his idol, the Zoroastrians sing Thy praises over the fire, the Materialist was driven to Thee from the fact of the universe, no-one could formulate a coherent denial of Thee.'³

What is meant here is not an easy syncretism, but that man from his inadequate attempts at understanding God is constantly driven to the Reality. Surely this agrees with Acts 14: 17, 'yet he did not leave himself without witness'. In Romans Paul tells us that God is known by all peoples, however much they have corrupted their knowledge of Him and however much they have been perverted into idolatry (Rom. 1: 20-23).

With these three assumptions we can actually look at some of the issues at stake in Christian-Muslim dialogue.

a. God

The Muslim view of God is that God is utterly transcendent; His relation to the world and to man is that of Creator to creatures. Rumi, the Persian poet, puts it thus: 'The jealousy of God surely means that He is utterly other, He is beyond discourse and the noise of words.'⁴ Although God is spoken of in the Qur'an (V: 54) as loving man, He loves them (*i.e.* His people), yet His love is almost detached approval for the good. He is merciful (one of His attributes) to sinners, but not loving. In any case the radical love of God in the New Testament is not found in Islam and the whole concept of a God who suffers for His people is quite foreign.

In approaching a Muslim it is quite useful to start from God's omnipotence. Here there is common ground and the Christian can then ask the Muslim why, if God is omnipotent, does the Muslim think it is impossible for Him to become man? This is a very difficult point in the discussion, because the Muslim will at once ask who, if God became man, would be left to rule the universe? It is here that one gets tangled up in all sorts of talk about 'parts' of God, *etc.* I think that the Christian position can be put in the following manner: God has tried down the ages to speak through the prophets; however, the prophets were not really successful in getting their message across, so God decided to speak to man Himself through a human form. Jesus therefore was God speaking to man and yet He was fully human. It is in this sense that He is His Word (*i.e.* God's Word, Qur'an IV: 172).

b. The Trinity

This is the most misunderstood Christian doctrine in the Qur'an. It is usually the first objection to Christianity

brought by the Muslim, and yet it is advisable to steer clear of it for a while and to lay the foundation of basic Christian truths that lie behind the doctrine of the Trinity. When pressed by the Muslim one could say something like this: The Christian, along with others, knows that God is the Creator of the world and its Sustainer. This is God the Father. Father, because He brings us into being and provides for our needs. The Christian knows that God has spoken in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is God the Son. Son, not in any physical sense, but as the eternal Word of God He proceeds from the Father. The Muslim understands the concept of the eternal Word of God and it should not be too difficult to show him how Jesus is the eternal Word of the Father. One can talk about His authoritative preaching, His raising of people from the dead, His powers of creation—all powers explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an (II: 87; III: 49). The Holy Spirit is the agency used by God the Father to work in the church and the world. He is known through His power and the Qur'an is aware of His existence (II: 87; XVII: 86; XL: 15, *etc.*). Muslim commentators generally try to identify the Holy Spirit with Gabriel, but I can find little warrant for this in the Qur'an itself.

c. *The death of Jesus*

The Qur'an is ambiguous about the death of Jesus, but in any case atonement is explicitly rejected as a doctrine. How should one talk about the death of Jesus to a Muslim? Two approaches may be useful here:

(i) To say that man was created as obedient to God and yet free. He chose to rebel and as a result was neither willing nor able to return to God. Christ came to do what man would not and could not do, *i.e.* to be a perfectly obedient man, to be the second Adam. Thus in God's sight man was seen in Christ to return to obedience. Christians are those who have been accepted *on trust* by God as obedient because of their faith in Christ's work and because of their willingness to follow Christ. Christ's radical obedience to God led inevitably to a clash with evil men and evil forces and finally to His crucifixion. He was obedient unto death. There is an analogy to Christ's obedience in Muslim martyrology: the example of Hassan and Hussein in refusing to give in to infidelity and in dying for their belief. However, *Christ* was openly vindicated by God and raised up on the third day.

(ii) Christ's death and resurrection are a battle with the devil and they set man free from the slavery of sin. Jesus Christ is therefore a revelation from God; *i.e.* He shows us that God is. God in Christ is not just a beautiful concept, for He is real and can be seen, touched and handled. He is also the perfectly obedient man and restores man to a relationship of trust with God. He is the Saviour, for God accepts us because of His perfect obedience and because in following Him we are saved.

d. *Jesus and the Qur'an*

In discussion with the Muslim it should be noted that for him Muhammad is *not* the Word of God; it is the Qur'an that is the Word of God. Therefore it is the Qur'an's claims to be the Word of God which must be compared to Jesus' claims. On the one hand one can stress the authority of Jesus Christ, His miracles, His resurrection, and on the other hand one can, with sensitivity, question the accuracy of the Qur'an, its moral teaching, *etc.* This is a matter for deep study and cannot of course be discussed within the compass of a brief paper.

e. *Jesus and Muhammad*

Although Muhammad is not considered the Word of God, he is the founder of Islam and his life can be compared to the life of Jesus. The pure life of Jesus is incomparably greater than the relatively worldly life of Muhammad. This again is a matter for detailed study. One must not of course engage in a mud-slinging match, but one must point out that even according to the Qur'an Muhammad was a worldly man involved in fighting, in taking wives, in raiding and pillaging, whereas Jesus was free from these preoccupations and led a life of nearness to God and compassion to His neighbour. Which is the more obviously godly way?

f. *Incarnation in Islam*

Bishop Cragg has suggested that the idea of Rasuliyah or 'sentness' could be a starting-point for Muslim-Christian discussion in this field.⁵ He points out that the very fact of God speaking through His messengers involves God in the world. Is it so far-fetched, one may then ask the Muslim, that God speaks through a certain man in such a unique and immediate way that we can say this is God with us?

It is to be noted that Islam has rarely managed to keep free of incarnational language. Very early on in Islamic history we find incarnational language being used of Muhammad. The Sufis used incarnational language not only about Muhammad but very often about themselves (Al-Hallaj and Bayazid) and about other Sufis (*e.g.* Rumi's use of it with regard to Shams-e-Tabriz). All this despite the prohibition of incarnational language!

Can the Christian not point the Muslim to Him who claimed to be the incarnate Son of God and the power of whose life confirmed this claim? At any rate, instances of incarnational language used by Muslims are useful to show the Muslim that the context is not utterly strange to his tradition.

g. *Salvation*

The Qur'an acknowledges Jesus to be the Messiah, the Saviour, but in truth there is no saviour-figure in Islam. Salvation is obtained by heeding the prophets of God and by performing God's works. In practice, however, Muslims, like other men, feel inadequate and feel that they need God's grace for forgiveness and salvation. It is then possible to talk to the Muslim about the work

of Christ outlined in c. above.

h. The Bible

The Muslim has many misconceptions about the Bible and has both Qur'anic and traditional warrant for believing that it has been distorted by both Jews and Christians (Q II: 80, *etc.*). The Muslim believes that the various sections of the Bible, the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospel (*sic*) were given directly from God to the relevant prophet. One has to explain to him therefore that the Bible was written by many men over hundreds of years, all writing under the inspiration of God. One can point out that very ancient manuscripts of the Bible exist and that if the Muslim thinks that the Bible has been substantially altered, then the onus of proof is on him. Muslims have recently discovered the work of certain biblical critics and they point to that as evidence that the Bible has been changed. Whatever the merits of each particular case of criticism, we can point out that criticism is equipped to discover the origins of various parts of Scripture and *not* to discover whether a particular document is substitute for another document which is not even extant! Furthermore, most recent scholarship has discovered that the central books of the New Testament are very early and that the story is consistently given variations in details and emphases. The central facts remain unchanged, that Jesus of Nazareth lived a most remarkable life, that He died a tragic death and that He was gloriously raised to life again. Certainly when the Qur'an is examined under the very same canons as employed in biblical criticism it hardly emerges as a unity. It has various strands of Jewish, Christian and pagan tradition. It has different versions of the same story. It has unlikely genealogies, *etc.* Furthermore it has attached to it the doctrine of abrogation by which earlier Qur'anic revelations are abrogated if they contradict later ones! This is of course a very convenient doctrine, because if one points to a contradiction within the Qur'an the Muslim can always claim that the later revelation abrogated the earlier.

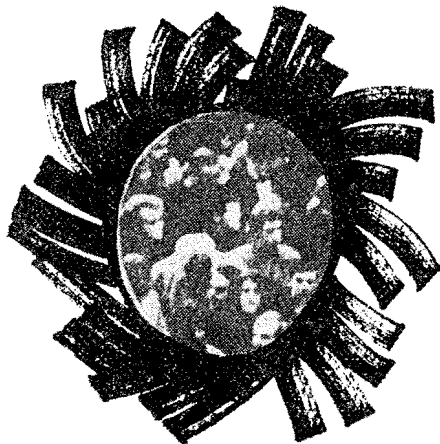
One must explain to the Muslim that the formation of the New Testament canon was a gradual process. Different authorities existed which testified to the life of Jesus Christ; the church had to gather these together, and it is quite obvious that in their central claims they bear each other out.

One can look upon certain beliefs in Islam as arising from an appreciation of God as manifested in nature. Other beliefs seem to arise from a definite experience of God—a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. So far these experiences seem to be genuine and should be accepted by the Christian. Is the Qur'an inspired? I think that the Christian would have to say 'No'. There is much in the Qur'an that contradicts the Christian records and one cannot say that, to the Christian, it sounds like God speaking to man. Nevertheless it does indicate a genuine experience of God and a desire to live according to God's will, and as such it must be respected by all men and by Christians in particular.

Apart from the special approach outlined above, it must be remembered that the Muslim is just like any other human being and shares the predicament of the human race. As such he has the same anxieties and needs that we all have. The gospel can be preached to the Muslim as to anyone else as answering man's deepest needs for forgiveness, for wholeness, for knowledge of God. The above is merely an attempt to discuss some of the special problems that Muslims face when confronted by the gospel. It is our task to remove unnecessary stumbling-blocks in the way of the Muslim searcher for truth.

References

- 1 J. W. Sweetman, *Islam and Christian Theology* (1948), p. 66.
- 2 R. W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (1962).
- 3 *Ruba'iyat-e-Hali* (1932).
- 4 Mathuawi I:1713.
- 5 K. Cragg, 'Islam and Incarnation' in J. Hick, *Truth and Dialogue* (1975), pp. 126f.



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