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IDA GLASER

Millennial Reverie: Muslims in Britain

Relations with Islam constitute one of the greatest challenges facing the contemporary church. Ida Glaser considers the situation in the UK, and issues an eloquent call to the church to seek to understand Islam better, and to co-operate on questions of common concern, while not being afraid to share faith in Jesus honestly and sensitively. At the same time, she offers very helpful practical guidance to churches in this difficult area.

A change of scene?

One of the most challenging and moving articles I have read on mission to Muslims is Constance Padwick's 1938 'North African Reverie',¹ written among the ruins of the Christian churches of Carthage. Padwick was a missionary who travelled widely in North Africa and the Middle East, and is best known for her collection of popular Islamic devotions² and her biography of Temple Gairdner.³ One of the few female missionaries to Muslims whose name is familiar to her successors of the third millennium,⁴ her 'reverie' shows us her devotion to Christ, her awareness of history, her agonized compassion for Muslims, and her determination to bring the Gospel to them, no matter how great the cost. She was aware of the difficulties: 'Here in Islam is the hardest, most ingrained, loyal and stubborn resistance to the claims of Christ, resistance not only individual but national and supra-national.'⁵

Musing in multi-religious Birmingham, I ask myself, 'What has changed since then?' Not the difficulty of the task – Islam is still one of the greatest challenges to the Christian Gospel. Not the need for devotion to Christ, awareness of history, compassion for Muslims, or determined persistence. Not even the fact that it is often women who are in the forefront of mission to 'ordinary' Muslim people, although they are seldom so well-known as their male colleagues. But progress has been made in sharing the Gospel, and the political, social and economic scene has changed almost beyond recognition.

1 C. Padwick, 'North African Reverie', *International Review of Missions*, vol 27 no 107, 1938, pp 341-54.

2 C. Padwick, *Muslim Devotions*, SPCK, 1961, republished by One World, Oxford 1996.

3 C. Padwick, *Temple Gairdner of Cairo*, SPCK, London 1929. Temple Gairdner was a missionary in Egypt.

4 Another of her era is Lilius Trotter, founder of the Algiers Mission Band, a forerunner of the present day Arab World Ministries. *A Passion for the Impossible*, by Miriam Huffman Rockness, Harold Shaw Publishers, Wheaton Ill, 1999, tells her life story.

5 Padwick, 'Reverie', p 352.

In almost every place where Constance Padwick travelled, there are now groups of people who follow Jesus. Numbers are small, and many fear to be publicly identified as Christians, but they are there, as a witness to the power of the Gospel in even the most unlikely situations. In the 1930's, only a tiny proportion of Christian missionary effort was directed towards Islam. Indeed, in many colonial situations the British rulers made agreements to refrain from evangelizing Muslims. Today, increasing numbers of Christians are hearing and obeying God's call to be witnesses in the Muslim world. The colonial system that assisted many missionaries has gone, and Muslims have been regaining confidence and political influence throughout the world; the balance of power has changed. Perhaps even more significant for Christian mission have been the movements of peoples around the globe, so that substantial Muslim communities can now be found in almost every country.

This last point has several important implications for the UK churches.

First, it is no longer only specialist missionaries who are witnessing to Muslims – all Christians who have Muslims living nearby are signs to them of what Christianity is about. It is not only those who you or I would identify as 'Christian' that provide Muslims' understanding of Christianity: it is those who the Muslims identify as 'Christian' that determine their views. And, since to be Muslim is to be part of a community, that means that all those who are identified as being part of a Christian community may be considered Christian. Many Muslims assume that all white people are Christian. Witnessing to Muslims in Britain is therefore not an option. Muslims see people they consider to be Christian, and draw their own conclusions. This is also true of those who realize that there is a big difference between being Christian in name and being Christian in practice: they see all those in their area who attend church, and, again, draw their own conclusions. A little reflection on the inner city areas in which the majority of Muslims live, and on media images of British life and church, will indicate that the question is not *whether* we share the Gospel with Muslims, but *what kind of* Gospel they are going to hear. This is a challenge for the whole church.

Second, there is not always such a cultural distance between Christians and Muslims as there has been when missionaries have gone to distant lands. On the one hand, there are increasing numbers of Asian Christians in Britain, many of whom have themselves come to Christ from other faiths, including some from Islam: on the other, there are increasing numbers of Muslims who have absorbed western ways of thinking, or who are themselves westerners who have embraced Islam.

Third, the Muslim presence is not only a mission opportunity, but also challenges our whole society at many levels. Islam affects all aspects of life: the *shari'ah* is concerned with politics and economics, criminal justice and education as well as family organization, hygiene and what westerners might identify as religious matters. It therefore presents not only Christians but also our 'tolerant', post-modern society with a system that claims to be absolutely true, and that has much to say in the public as well as the private realm. This does not fit into common views of 'religion'.

Fourth, Muslims in Britain come from many different backgrounds. They not only have differing levels of education and social backgrounds, but also come from

different ethnic groups and practise different sorts of Islam. They are also reacting to the west in different ways – from those who cling to traditional forms, through those who become more pietistic in faith, to those who embrace radical new ideas, which may be either westernized or revolutionary.

A Christian response?

Padwick reflects on the response of the North African churches to the arrival of the Muslim rulers in the seventh century. She recalls the earlier martyrdom of Perpetua, and the faith of Augustine, and mourns, 'The fact remains that the Muslim onrush, which for centuries hemmed in Christendom from expansion to Asia and Africa, did not call out in the Church a response of faith like that of Perpetua or Augustine, outweighing the calamity that called it out.'⁶ The UK is not about to be conquered by Muslim armies! But we do well to ask what a 'response of faith' to the coming of Muslims into our midst might mean, and whether our actual responses are from faith, or from fear, hostility or indifference.

1 Timothy 2:1-7 can help us to see what a 'response of faith' might be. This passage is countering a restricted vision, according to which the Gospel is not seen to be for all peoples. The writer urges prayer for *all*, because there is *one* God who is therefore the God of *all*, and this God has provided *one* mediator, through whom he wants *all* to be saved. The passage therefore addresses the four points I made in the previous section of this article.

First, it underlines the importance of making the Gospel clear to all peoples, including the Muslims living among us. There could not be a clearer statement of the unique finality of Christ. It therefore functions not only as a clarion call to prayer, but also as a motivation towards evangelism. The passage ends with Paul's reminder that he himself is an apostle to the Gentiles – to peoples he had previously considered unclean. We are called to share Christ with Muslims despite a history of misunderstanding and hostility.

And there is a history of misunderstanding and hostility. Christians I meet in the United Kingdom today often start from a point of fear and anger when they think about Islam. Constance Padwick, having reflected on the history of Muslim-Christian relations in North Africa, comments, 'If to some lands the missionaries of the nineteenth century expansion could go clean-handed with their joyous evangel, to the world of Islam they could only come as heirs of all the conflicts and resentments...'⁷ Paul's calling across the Jew-Gentile barrier reminds us that God calls us across barriers to share Christ with our Muslim neighbours.

Second, the repeated 'all' of the passage alerts us to the universal nature of God's concern, and therefore of his church. I have noted the increasing numbers of Asian Christians in the UK, including converts from other faiths. They are a great gift to the churches, in showing us something of the wonderful variety of God's kingdom, and in bringing their own insights into the Scriptures and into life. They are also a challenge: our churches cannot remain the same if we welcome people

6 Padwick, 'Reverie', p 344.

7 Padwick, 'Reverie', p 348.

from different backgrounds, any more than Peter could remain the same when God wanted to save Cornelius (see Acts 10). It is a sad fact that many converts to Christ find the church so difficult that they turn away from it, if not from him. This paper will be restricted to reflections on Christian-Muslim relations and evangelism; but we need to note that our relations with those outside the church, and our evangelism, will be in vain if we cannot effectively love those who become our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Third, embedded in this call, almost as a parenthesis, is the elaboration that prayer should include 'kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness' (v 2): along with concern for the salvation of all comes concern for wider social issues. The pastoral epistles, as well as many other Old and New Testament books, testify to the importance of lives that are seen to be godly in society, and to concern for social and political order. Although the Bible is very different from Islam in its understanding of the basis of such living, it is equally concerned with all aspects and levels of life, and not only with those areas that our secular society might relegate to private religion. The challenge to right living comes not only from the Muslims in our midst, but also from Scripture itself.

Fourth, the concern of God for *all* peoples, together with Paul's apostleship to peoples different from himself, remind us of the variety of Muslim peoples in the UK. Here is an implied challenge to relate to all these different peoples, and to share the Gospel with them appropriately. Paul had to become 'all things to all people' (1 Cor. 9:22) in order to carry out his commission: the variety of Muslims we meet will not offer a lesser challenge!

A response of faith, then, will include fervent prayer for both the salvation of Muslims and the welfare of society. It will include recognizing and crossing barriers, responding to social and political problems, living godly lives in an ungodly society, finding ways of effectively sharing the Gospel, and churches being ready to change as they receive new members. I want to focus briefly on two of these questions: the social and political arena, and evangelism.

The social and political arena

Evangelicals usually find mission and evangelism more congenial than politics. I am no exception! But, through contact with Muslims, I have found myself drawn into social and political concerns. The concerns of Muslims, and their interaction with society, have alerted me to the necessity of involvement, and I have been challenged by how much of the Bible relates to such matters. Two particular evangelical initiatives are relevant here.

'Faith and Society' is an initiative involving Muslims and Christians in the UK.⁸ Together, we seek to face up to issues raised as we live as minorities in secular Britain. There is a steering group of three Christians and three Muslims that

8 See my 'Faith and Society in the UK', in *Transformation*, vol 17 no 1, 2000, pp 26-9. For details of future events, contact The

Administrator, Faith to Faith, Carrs Lane Church Centre, Carrs Lane, Birmingham B4 7SX, e-mail faithtofaith@talk21.com

organizes a yearly conference and encourages five focus groups, on law, education, media, civic society and family, sexuality and gender.

The Christians who initiated this process saw the need to understand how a missionary religion with strong truth claims and political implications, like Islam, was interacting with British society, and felt that, as evangelical missionaries in close contact with Muslims, they could help 'liberal', 'secular' society to understand its challenges. It then became clear that this could not be done without the cooperation of Muslims, and that many Muslims are themselves struggling with the challenges of keeping their faith as citizens of a largely godless country. We needed to talk together, and then together to address our society.

The process is experimental and exploratory, but it is also, I believe, necessary. So far, it has resulted in some good relationships being built, and in remarkably frank discussion of the issues facing both Muslims and Christians. Possibilities of joint action are being explored in, for example, working towards more balanced media reporting of both faiths.

'Suffering and power in Christian-Muslim relations' was the seventh consultation of the Theological Resource Network of the Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion, held in Jos, Nigeria, in July 1999.⁹ 25 pastors, theologians and Islamicists from 12 countries met to hear Bible readings, papers and case studies and to do group Bible study, as a basis for reflecting theologically on Christian-Muslim relations. Inevitably, we included some thinking about evangelism and care of converts, but we focused determinedly on the social and political issues facing Christians as they relate to Muslims in different contexts. This was because of the urgency of these issues in so many countries, not least in Nigeria, which was deliberately chosen as an appropriate setting for the conference.¹⁰

Three things were striking. First, there was the sheer variety of situations, issues and faces of Islam met, and hence of responses made by Christians seeking to be Christlike and biblical. Second, there was the desperate need to help church leaders and members alike to understand Islam: in every situation, Christians' ignorance both of their own faith and of Islam was bewailed. Third, we found some theological issues being constantly raised but never resolved in our discussions. I mention them here because we noted the need for further study, and the conference resolved to 'commend them to Christian theologians and missiologists as matters of urgent concern for the nature and witness of the Church in its encounter with Islam in the 21st century'.¹¹

9 The conference proceedings are published as vol 17 no 1 of *Transformation*. Jan-March 2000.

10 These EFAC conferences seek to offer insights that will assist evangelical Anglican leaders, including bishops, worldwide. The need to address questions of Christian-Muslim relations was made clear at the 1998 Lambeth Conference, which recommended follow-up consultations.

11 Conference report, in *Transformation*, vol 17, no 1, 2000, p 6. The theological issues are laid out in more detail in my 'Theological questions: an agenda for study', in the same issue, pp 44-8.

These unresolved questions include:

- *The state*: Can there be a Christian state, as there can undoubtedly be an Islamic state? Is our 'secular' state as a-religious as it sometimes seems, or does it have necessary Christian roots? Can we gain a theological understanding of secularism, as a Christian ordering of society that allows all peoples freedoms by right of their creation?
- *Territoriality*: There is a tendency to say that, in the Old Testament, land was an important aspect of the covenant, but in the New Testament, land no longer matters. In Muslim-Christian contexts, the question of territory becomes important again. Can there be Christian territory? Can Muslims and Christians effectively share territory? Or must we always think either of Muslim territories in which non-Muslims come under Islamic laws, or of, say, secular territories in which Muslims come under secular laws?
- *Ethics*: Should our decisions about what we do depend on other peoples' perceptions of what we do, or should we do what we believe to be right regardless? For example, we might see granting permission to Muslims to build mosques as clear natural justice. In some situations, the Muslims themselves might see the building of a mosque as an advance for Islam into Christian territory. Should this make any difference to our planning decisions?

We need, I suggest, our best Christian minds to grapple with such issues if we are to know what a right 'response of faith' might be, not only in the UK, but worldwide.

What about evangelism?

Involvement in these socio-political areas is not evangelism, but it is necessary to evangelism in that: it ensures that the Gospel is not brought into disrepute before we start; it may remove some of the unnecessary barriers to understanding; it makes us grapple with oft-neglected aspects of biblical teaching, on matters that concern Muslims;¹² it may encourage an environment within which Muslims may feel safer to listen to and accept the Gospel. However, such activities cannot replace evangelism.

People often ask me, 'How do I share the Gospel with Muslims?' Some want just a booklet that will tell them how to do it. I tell them that there is no such booklet, and that I do not know how they should share the Gospel with Muslims. It all depends on the particular Muslims with whom they want to share. They might as well ask, 'How do I share the Gospel with Europeans?' There are so many different Europeans, of different cultures, ages, occupations, qualifications, and interests! They think in different ways, and have different needs. One cannot give any 'method' by which all can hear the Gospel effectively. As noted above, there is a great variety of Muslims in the UK.

¹² If they are biblical, they presumably also matter to God!

However, Constance Padwick offers a starting point that is, I believe, widely relevant. She recognizes not only Islamic resistance to the claims of Christ, but also the sad history of Christian hostility to Islam and even to Muslims: 'To the needs of all lands outside Christendom the Church through long centuries showed a neglect partly born of ignorance. But to the lands of Islam (with a few shining exceptions of heroic love) she showed not only the negative of neglect but the positive of hostility and retaliation.' Padwick therefore reflects on the way in which we should approach Muslims, and concludes that it should be 'not in superiority but in penitent love, to make what loving reparation is allowed us to the heart of our forgiving God and to the unforgiving Muslim world'. 'This duty lies upon us,' she says, 'whatever are the opportunities of joyful service elsewhere.'¹³

Of course, it is not only Christians that have sins of which to repent, and many Christian sins are in the past. However, it is surely for us to repent and make reparation, whatever others do; and past sins have long shadows. Further, many attitudes of the past have their effects in the present. It is not unusual for Muslims to see echoes of colonialism in aspects of globalization; and western interference in the affairs of Muslim countries is often seen as Christian *jihad*, or a new crusade.

'Penitent love' is, then, still applicable, and I would suggest that it is often necessary in order to break down barriers and correct misunderstandings. But what form should it take? This will depend on the particular Muslims we are seeking to love. For example, among the more theologically literate, there may be a work of reparation for the aspects of scholarship that have resulted in books by professing Christians that affirm the Islamic critique of the Gospel. *The Myth of God Incarnate*, for example, has been widely welcomed by Muslims as evidence that even Christians are beginning to realize that Jesus was not God.¹⁴ Among black Muslims, it may be necessary to repudiate racism, and to work for healing from its effects. It may also be necessary to put straight the historical record – to be clear about the history of Islamic *jihad* and slavery in Africa, as well as being honest about European exploitation of black people. Among the many Muslims involved in business and finance, Christian practice needs to be seen to be at least as just and ethical as Islamic economic theory. For the first Muslims to move into an area – for example, those establishing a small business, or newly arrived refugees – love may be a warm welcome that contrasts with the sadly ambivalent attitude of so many people.

The majority of British Muslims come from families with origins in the rural areas of the Indian sub-continent. Many live in inner city areas, and, because of continued inter-continental marriages, largely retain the cultures and languages of their places of origin. Such communities tend to be disadvantaged in both education and employment, and some within them have little interaction with non-Muslims. Amongst such people, patterns of mission have emerged which might be seen as 'penitent love'. They are certainly loving and costly, as they seek patiently to provide a context in which Christ can be encountered as well as proclaimed. Here are some examples of such patterns of mission:

13 Padwick, 'Reverie', p 351.

14 John Hick (ed), *The Myth of God Incarnate*, SCM, London 1977.

Incarnation. Some Christians give their lives to living amongst Muslims and identifying with their needs. They become part of the community, getting involved in community associations, joining the fight against crime and for the environment, becoming governors of local schools, etc. They also spend many hours visiting Muslim homes. Muslim social organization means that families and single women are particularly effective here.

Work amongst children and young people. Muslims growing up in Britain may encounter particular problems as they seek to negotiate between cultures and languages. Some – particularly young men – slip into the worst aspects of western culture. Others, especially those who feel excluded by racism and prejudice from the good things of Britain, react by joining radical Islamic groups. Some simply struggle on. There is a place here for Christians to offer support through ‘drop-ins’, youth clubs and homework clubs, as well as to offer a listening ear to young neighbours needing to talk. Some have also opened their homes as safe places for young women who decide to leave home.

Professional involvement. Many Christians meet Muslims, and people of other faiths, in the course of their work. For some Muslims, such contacts may be their only opportunities for meeting not only Christians but also people from other ethnic and religious groups. Health and educational services are particularly important here. Increasingly, Christians in such jobs are taking time to learn about the faith and culture of the Muslims they meet, and to pray for them.

Specialist workers can have an important role, since they can give time to in-depth relationships, and can have the familiarity with language and culture that can encourage other church members in outreach. They may also be able to organize specific activities such as children’s clubs and women’s groups.

In all the above, I would stress the need for honesty.¹⁵ Love is not evangelism, although it is necessary to it. We need to be completely honest about our faith, and, as we are asked, about our desire for our Muslim friends to come to Christ. But we also need to make sure that our acts of love are just that – acts of love, and not ways of manipulating opportunities for evangelism, although it is in such contexts that opportunities to speak of our faith often arise.

In a church that is praying for and seeking to love its Muslim neighbours, it will also be appropriate deliberately to include them in any invitation to church-based activities, including those designed to proclaim the Gospel,¹⁶ Some churches do this by including appropriate languages in all posters, leaflets, etc. Some specifically invite people of different faiths to events associated with major festivals. Ensuring that activities are culturally appropriate can be a great challenge to love – as, for example, in wearing clothes that do not offend, enabling the sexes to meet separately, and providing food that can be eaten by all.

15 Some Muslims speak strongly against Christian service, that they see as a covert form of evangelism that exploits the weakest Muslims, and call for a cessation of *diakonia*. Christians cannot stop serving people, but we do well to beware of dishonesty. See the discussion in *Christian*

Mission and Islamic Da'wah: Proceedings of the Chambesy Dialogue, The Islamic Foundation, Leicester 1982, pp 84ff and the conference statement, pp 100-101.

16 Some Muslims have found Alpha courses helpful, especially when held in non-church premises.

When we are deliberately inviting Muslims to hear the Gospel, we should say so clearly. It is interesting that in his study Jean-Marie Gaudeul notes that some Muslims were attracted to Christ through an open invitation to ‘come and find out for yourself’ – an invitation that was warm and hospitable, but without any sort of pressure.¹⁷ There is freedom in the UK to be quite open about such invitations.

This brings us to a key question: what leads Muslims to Christ? Gaudeul’s study of about 100 converts shows that it is Christ himself who draws Muslims. This may be through seeing him in Christian people, through meeting him in a vision or a dream, through reading about him in the Bible, or even through learning about him from the Qur’an. Some may need to work through arguments, some may find healing, and some may be attracted to Christian community; but, in the last analysis, it is Jesus Christ Himself and what he has done that brings people to faith. This can take a long time, and many encounters with Christians.¹⁸

Our task as Christians is, then, to show Muslims the Lord Jesus in whatever way is appropriate in any particular situation. That is the aim of the lives of ‘penitent love’ lived by many Christians in Britain. It is in that context that they seek to speak of Jesus, by, for example, telling stories, offering Gospels, and showing videos if people are willing to watch. The normality of talk about God in Muslim communities means that there are many opportunities to share faith in all the situations outlined above. The prevalence of ‘popular Islam’ in Britain also means that people are often open to – and even request – prayer in the name of Jesus about particular difficulties, and this may give another important way for them to see something of him.¹⁹

However, we have also to remove the many misconceptions about him, and the various barriers that stop people from seeing him, and that can take time. One such barrier is the hostility to Christian teaching noted at the beginning of this article. Specific attacks can be experienced in many different circumstances. Even quite young children are taught the basic questions and denials:

How can a man be worshipped as God?

Jesus did not die.

How can three be one?

The Bible has been changed and the Qur’an has not.

Christians get easy forgiveness, and do not have realistic laws to live by.²⁰

17 J-M. Gaudeul, *Called from Islam to Christ: Why Muslims become Christians*, Monarch, Crowborough 1999, pp 134ff.

18 I do not know how people work such things out, but I have heard estimates that a Muslim has to hear the Gospel an average of 16 times before accepting it, and that it takes an average of 10 years from a first encounter for a Muslim to come to Christ.

19 ‘Popular Islam’ is a general term for practices, generally disapproved by ‘official Islam’, that seek to use spiritual prescriptions to meet human needs. They include devotion to saints, repeated

readings of Qur’anic formulae, and a variety of amulets, inscriptions, etc. See B. Musk, *The Unseen face of Islam*, MARC/Monarch 1989.

20 G. Sarwar, *Islam Beliefs and Teachings*, The Muslim Educational Trust, London, many editions, is widely used to teach English speaking Muslim children. It states that ‘the Bible, as it is available today, has many incorrect things in it. Its authenticity and divinity are doubtful.’ (p 30) ‘Trinity is clear partnership (*shirk*). It is a big sin to say that anyone is the son of Allah... Prophet ‘*Isa* (Jesus) was not crucified to death...’ (p 158)

We need to be able to deal with these very specific attacks on the truth of what we believe. Rather than having packaged answers, I believe that Christians need:

- *Confidence in our own faith.* We need to know what we mean by the trinity and the divinity of Christ, and to know why we believe it. We need to understand the nature and historicity of the Bible, and to know how it came into being. We need to think about the law and how we choose to live.
- *Understanding of Muslim objections.* We need to see not only what the Muslims are saying, but why they are saying it. How do they understand the Christian teachings to which they object? What is it that makes these teachings so objectionable to them?
- *To learn to respond in a way that makes sense to the Muslim,* and goes behind the objection to the heart of the matter and the personal challenge that the Muslim needs. As Jesus always responded to hostile questions by discerning and dealing with the fundamental attitudes of the questioners, we need to discern the persons behind the standard issues that they are raising.

There are, of course, circumstances in which it is appropriate to focus directly on some of the Muslim challenges and even to return the challenge, for example in a university debating society. But to focus on the standard issues of the divinity of Christ, the trinity, the crucifixion and the reliability of the New Testament may be to be waylaid by the Islamic agenda. From the beginning of reported debates between Muslims and Christians, there has been a tendency for Muslims to attack in these areas, and for Christians to rehearse the old ninth-century arguments, perhaps with increasing sophistication. However, they can deflect us from the heart of the Gospel, just as the attacks of religious people on Jesus on details of law could have deflected him from his focus on fulfilling that very law. Again and again, he made it clear that he was not interested in such questions, but in dealing with the fallen state of humanity that the law can regulate but not change.

Thus, as well as the theological challenges of Muslim-Christian relations, we have theological challenges in communicating the Gospel with Muslims. We need ways of moving from the Islamic agenda to the Gospel issues behind it. I offer the following suggestions:

- Muslims, like the religious leaders of New Testament times, are interested in the details of law, and we need constantly to be pointing them not to the superiority of Christian ethics, but to the limitation of the whole concept of law.
- The need is not to discuss how Christ can be both God and man, but rather to witness to the glory of God as seen in the Word incarnate.
- The need is not to produce models of the trinity, but rather to be drawing towards encounter with God who creates and loves, God who redeems in Christ, and God who indwells in the Spirit.
- The need is not to focus on the historical reliability of the Bible and the questionability of the Qur'an, but on the whole question of how God speaks to human beings. What is the nature of a sacred book? How can it be both human and divine?

– This takes us again to the heart of the matter, which is expounded in so many of Jesus' parables: What is God like, and what are we like? Is there any compatibility between the human and the divine?²¹

In all of these areas, we need to find starting points in the Muslim's own thinking. For example, he or she will already have an understanding of Jesus from the Qur'an and from Muslim traditions. We can start from what we acknowledge as true in that understanding as we speak of him.²²

Such approaches may appear to be avoiding confrontation – and avoid confrontation many of us do, wherever possible. But they are not an easy option. Constance Padwick, in reflecting on whether the reason for the lack of success amongst Muslims might have been too much reliance on the old controversial methods, agrees that 'nothing could be more out of place in the Church's work for Islam (that Islam which her own spiritual attitude in the past, positive or negative, has helped to antagonize) than the hardness of the controversial spirit.'²³ But she worries that turning from controversy to 'a simple setting forth of the Gospel to needy souls' might lead to 'a serious neglect of the preparation of missionaries in regard to Islamic studies'. She continues, 'In reality, the "no controversy" attitude demands that such studies should be profounder. For when all is said and done, the vast misunderstandings of Islam about Christianity have to be removed, and men (sic) have to be converted in mind as well as heart. To "set forth Jesus to needy souls", using words so that they shall cause the minimum of misunderstanding and anticipating difficulties so as to meet them tacitly before they can be raised as controversy, calls for a higher grasp of the Muslim mind than the ability to parry set arguments.'²⁴

Beyond all these questions of method are the spiritual issues. We have to recognize that, irrespective of methods used, mission amongst Muslims is difficult. It is costly both to missionary and to converts, and experience shows that fruit is long in coming. It is tempting to think that, if only we could get our methods right, we would see more fruit. Yet, in the end, it is not what we do that matters but what God is doing. We have to obey as well as we can, and to seek the clarity for which Paul asks prayer in Colossians 4:4. And here is the key – *we have to pray*. It is God who will open doors for us, and God who alone can teach us to make the Gospel clear. The challenge to all of us is to devote ourselves to prayer for the Muslims among us, and for all Christians who are in contact with them. The difficulty of the task, and the resistance of many Muslims to Christianity, are not reasons for giving up, but for persisting. We may find that it is not the historical

21 If the answer to this last question is, 'No', then there can be no incarnation, we are not fallen, we cannot be restored to a relationship that never existed, the atonement is nonsense, and, of course, an evidently human book like the Bible cannot also be the Word of God.

22 Kenneth Cragg has, in many books, sought Qur'anic clues that can be used to point

towards the incarnation and the cross. See, for example, *Common Prayer, One World*, Oxford 1999, which indicates the similarities in the heart desires of Muslims and Christians, and *The Christ and the Faiths*, SPCK, London 1986, chapter 2, which shows how the incarnation reveals a god who is 'greater'.

23 Padwick, 'Reverie', p 349.

24 Padwick, 'Reverie', p 349.

Jesus of the New Testament that they reject, but the idea of Christian faith they get from other Muslims, or from looking at western culture.

A friend who came to Christ from Islam wrote this: 'As I stand facing the minarets I hear a deafening cry. The cry of lost souls in Islam, a cry that will always be heard unless we take up the call to bring them the love of Christ. God's work is never wasted and hard work is worth it even if we don't see the fruits of our labour in our lifetime. Our obedience and service is not measured by God according to how many converts we get but by our love and willingness.'

So, let us go forward in faith, for love of the Lord and of Muslim people, assured that this will please him because he wants *all* peoples to be saved. I want to let Constance Padwick have the last word, as she had the first. Many things have changed since the 1920's, but this has not:

Effectively to believe in Christ's victory here, to abandon all power but Spirit-power in face of the massive this-worldly as well as other-worldly facts of Islam, would prove such a gymnastic as would fortify the Church for dealing with all other oppositions.... There is an epitome of the experience of inward strengthening awaiting a Church that yields herself to suffer for the world of Islam.²⁵

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25 Padwick, 'Reverie', p 352.