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Cross and Crown: The Impact of Islam on Britain, Church and Society

Patrick Sookhdeo

Last year the Metropolitan police accepted the principle that Muslims do not have to wear their badge, which includes a crown topped with a small cross. The decision followed the resignation of a Muslim traffic warden who said that he could not wear the symbol of another religion. Though but a small item on the daily news, this event neatly summarises the main issues concerning the place of Islam in the United Kingdom. The debate is set within the context of a post-colonial and post-Christian Britain, a country that has become uncertain of the role of the Christian faith in its national life.

While we as Christians do most definitely want to welcome and embrace individuals of all faiths and races within our society, it need not and must not be at the expense of denying the essence of our own beliefs or the needs of our fellow-Christians. Nor must we deny the truths of history or the issues that have shaped our society.

Muslims have a claim to our respect and compassion in that they share our common humanity. However, as Muhammad Iqbal¹ has rightly observed, Islam is not like Christianity in that its beliefs cannot be separated from the social order. It must also be recognized that while Islam has an inherent unity it is expressed in considerable diversity; liberals, conservatives and radicals disagree on a wide range of issues despite the fact that they are all Muslims.

1. Post-September 11th — Islam on the Map

To say, as many do, that September 11th, 2001 changed the world is deeply flawed. What it did however was to put Islam on the map. The media spotlight swung round to shine on Islamic activities, highlighting what has been going on for decades in terms of slowly, steadily and significantly establishing an Islamic presence in Britain. This process has involved building mosques, setting up *madrassas* (Qur'anic schools for children), creating Islamic institutions, changing the political and social climate, so that

Islam has become recognised and established as a religion within the United Kingdom.

Before September, 2001 it was relatively rare to come across a newspaper article, TV or radio programme about Islam or Muslims; now they are too frequent to be able to read or watch them all. The *Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *New Internationalist* are amongst the publications which have carried major features on Islam. The majority of media references to Islam are complimentary. Some also apologise for British society's perceived failure to care for Muslims. For example, according to a blurb in the *Radio Times* about a Radio 4 programme aired on 10th July, 2002, we are at last becoming more sensitive to the needs of Muslim students at university, providing prayer rooms and *halal* food. It also raised the issue of re-scheduling exams so they do not fall in Ramadan, something which does not even happen in Muslim countries.

2. Our Present Context – a Moral and Spiritual Vacuum

Since September 11th, 2001 there has been such a fascination with Islam that we are now faced in Britain with increasing numbers of ordinary British people who are converting to Islam. The post-war period has seen dramatic changes in attitudes, ideology and values within British society. Britain, more than any other western country, is burdened with guilt for her colonial past. Her traditions and values are now rejected as irrelevant and even shameful. Christianity, now set within a negative framework of colonialism and the Crusades, is in retreat. Its place has been taken by secular materialism, with its emphasis on immediate self-fulfilment, followed more recently by the New Age movements and the arrival of world faiths in our midst. These factors have combined to produce a society shaped by pluralism and relativism, with a resulting uncertainty as well as a spiritual and moral vacuum. It is this which Islam has been able so effectively to exploit.

What is true of British society is also largely true of the Church in Britain. Christians seem ashamed of their faith and eager to play it down. Certainty and confidence are now seen as arrogance. An article for lay readers rejects 'the notion of Christian exclusivism and superiority as inappropriate and perhaps even harmful for the new plural age that is already dawning'.² Likewise Christ himself seems to have become an embarrassment and has been written out of the modern versions of some old hymns.³ Space does

not permit a further catalogue of examples, but it would be easy to fill many pages. The Christological heart of our faith is being rapidly eroded.

3. The Islamic Advance

The date September 11th, 2001 when written down in figures (9111) looks similar to the Arabic letters that spell 'Allah'. Allah is now very much on the agenda in Britain. Islam has taken the initiative and in one year has been able to rehabilitate itself beyond recognition. It has been able to start filling the space which Christianity is vacating, even at times filling church pulpits with Muslim preachers.

As Christians, we seek to approach the world in vulnerability, with a spirit of self-giving and a desire to trust the word of the other. Islam is motivated by an altogether different principle; it thinks and acts both strategically and structurally. Many Muslim public statements since September 11th, 2001 have been coordinated by an international Muslim body which determines the writing of letters to the press, statements issued, who should appear on television, what they should say, how they should dress, etc. The result has been the successful promotion of a positive image of Islam as a just and peaceable way of life, with Muslims as the perpetual victims throughout history as well as in the present. It is noteworthy that the early sympathy with the U.S. after the atrocities of September 11th soon gave way to condemnation, and America was held to have brought the attacks on itself by its arrogance, greed, etc.

In Britain, Muslim leaders have called for textbooks to be checked and any negative comments about Islam or Muslims removed—a literal re-writing of history. Many Christians assist them with their agenda. Writers like Karen Armstrong present grossly inaccurate pictures of a violence-free early Islam. Recently a senior Anglican cleric from the Middle East made a statement to the effect that Arab Muslims have never oppressed Arab Christians in the whole history of Islam. Yet any scholar of the subject knows this to be risible.

Not only do Muslims wish Islam to be presented as guiltless from its inception until the present day, but also they want Muslims to be seen as victims, needing legal protection and redress for past wrongs suffered. The first Crusade is now widely believed to be an example of belligerent Christians

making an unprovoked attack on peaceable Muslims. In fact it was primarily a response to Islamic *jihad*, European Christians answering a call for help from eastern Christians who were being attacked by Islamic forces. In the media there are frequent condemnatory references to the Crusades, which finished centuries ago, but little mention of the many holy wars in which Muslims are engaged today in various parts of the world. Similarly, colonialism is seen as a purely white European activity, but the colonialist expansion of various Islamic empires is never mentioned. Slavery is also quoted as a Christian sin, although Muslim Arabs were heavily involved in their own slave trade. Indeed the only slave-owners nowadays are the Muslim Arabs of Sudan and Mauritania. Even the meaning of the word 'Islam' is now given as 'peace' instead of the accurate translation 'submission'.

When anti-terrorist laws were passed in December, 2001, British Muslims complained that they were being discriminated against and demanded legal protection. When General Synod affirmed on 6th July, 2002 that the Gospel 'must be shared with all, including people from other faiths or of no faith', it was condemned by Muslim leaders. But Islam itself is a missionary faith, just like Christianity, and its followers are mandated to try to convert others. Indeed Muslims are very active in mission (*da'wa*) in the United Kingdom.

In the embracing of Islam, many leaders in church and society have adopted a protective stance towards Islam. When Muslims are guilty of violence, whether in this country or elsewhere, the media generally avoid describing the perpetrators by their religion, using instead terms such as 'Asians' or perhaps unspecified 'terrorists'. When they are the victims their religion is clearly reported. Increasingly Christians are seeking to identify with 'oppressed Muslims' whether in Bosnia, Kashmir or Palestine, and to do this without any consideration of the position of Christian minorities in those contexts.

One facet of this protective stance towards Islam has been the desire to be fair to Islam and allow Muslims to speak for themselves, not just to be interpreted by Christians. This has resulted in the presence of Muslim speakers at various Christian gatherings and the advocacy of the Muslim agenda across the Christian spectrum.

So successful has been the re-interpretation of Islam that Joan Smith writing

in *The Times*⁴ compared Christian fundamentalism in the United States with Islamic extremism of the Bin Laden variety, implying that she found them equally frightening. Others have echoed this, including churchgoers. This shows the grossest ignorance of the basic natures, the fundamentals, of the two faiths.

4. Islam and Power

The irony of British Islam's current success in portraying itself as a victim is that Islam is a religion based on overt power. Zaki Badawi, Principal of the Muslim College, has said that Islam does not know how to live as a minority.

The Qur'an states, '*Izzat* belongs to God and His Messenger, and to the believers.' (Q. 63:8) *Izzat* is a multi-faceted Arabic term meaning power, strength, honour and glory. In Islam these characteristics belong not only to God and Muhammad, but also to all Muslims. Therefore Muslims must take the dominant position in society.

There is an interesting historical explanation for this characteristic of Islam. In the early days of Islam, Muhammad and his few followers lived in Mecca and were persecuted. They fled in 632 to Medina, where they were welcomed and established the first Islamic state, with Muhammad at its head. This Medinan state, governed by Shari'ah, is the ideal and model which all devout Muslims must attempt to replicate in as many places as possible.

Muslims call the places where Islam has control *Dar ul-Islam* (the house of Islam). Significantly the rest of the world is called *Dar ul-Harb* (the house of war) because Muslims are supposed to wage war (*jihad* in one meaning of the term) to change it into *Dar ul-Islam*. Zaki Badawi asserts that Europe has become *Dar ul-Islam*. This statement is interpreted by Bassam Tibi, a Syrian Muslim now professor at Goettingen, Germany, as an indication of Badawi's inability to accept that he is part of a minority in a non-Muslim context. Tibi's reasoning is that Badawi feels it is only the presence of Muslims in Europe which has brought civilisation here, the pre-existent Christian civilisation being of no validity.⁵

In the London borough of Tower Hamlets, Muslims have called for a name-change for some of the borough's wards which had Christian-sounding

names, for example, those called after saints. The Muslims said they could not live in places with Christian names. Some of the ward names have been changed and others are still being contested.

The Politics of Identity

This raises the important issue of where a Muslim's primary loyalty lies, and whether a good Muslim can be a good citizen of a non-Muslim country. Is a Muslim in the United Kingdom a Muslim Briton or a British Muslim? Stephen Timms MP, an evangelical Christian, is calling for the formation of a Muslim group within the Labour Party, similar to the Christian Socialist Movement. He has said, "For British Muslims being a Muslim is the number one thing about their identity and that is absolutely right...you can be 100% committed Muslim and 100% wholly British as well."⁶ Timms' assertion would certainly be convincing if re-written for Christians, since a Christian can indeed make their faith their identity and yet be thoroughly loyal to their homeland or the country where they are living. But it is difficult to see how a committed Muslim can be a loyal citizen of a country that is not governed according to Shari'ah.

Muslim comments on this issue vary, but it is noticeable that those addressed to the British public tend to take the stance that Muslims can be loyal citizens while those addressed to the Muslim public often say that their primary loyalty should be to the Muslim community worldwide, the *ummah*.

Last year, a consultation of British leaders of six faiths organised by the Labour Party, felt that swearing an oath of allegiance to the Queen, as MPs must do, undermines 'our identity as citizens and our commitment to a nation and each other'.⁷ Christians, on the other hand, have never had a problem with loyalty to the sovereign. One wonders whether the Muslim traffic warden who would not wear the badge of the Metropolitan police may have found the crown as objectionable as the cross.

The Muslim Agenda

Islam has a clear agenda, unchanged since the days of Muhammad, to gain ascendancy over as much territory as possible and to govern it according to Islamic law, the Shari'ah. In Britain this agenda is manifested in demands for *halal* food in prisons, schools and hospitals, *hijab* for school-girls, time off for Friday midday prayers, Islamic schools, pensions from Islamically acceptable

investments, and many other concessions, such as the special uniform for police and traffic wardens in London. Most of these concessions are being granted in those areas where Muslims are concentrated demographically.

But there are also calls for Muslims to be able to live by the 'family laws' of the Shari'ah, which includes polygamy, quick and easy divorce for men, and inheritance biased against women. A Shari'ah Council already exists in Britain with a hierarchy of Shari'ah judges. As the Muslim community grows and develops, their need for the application of Shari'ah becomes more urgent as a necessary prerequisite for their continued presence in the United Kingdom.

5. Dialogue

Interfaith dialogue is increasingly seen as the appropriate way for Christians to relate to Muslims. But those engaged in interfaith initiatives need to tread warily. There is a risk that Christians will do all the giving and Muslims all the taking. This is inherent in the nature of the two faiths, for Christianity prizes meekness, humility, sacrifice and self-denial whereas Islam prizes power and honour. According to Bassam Tibi, himself a Muslim, dialogue is usually characterised by deceit on the part of the Muslims and wishful thinking on the part of the Christians. He gives the example of the Bishop of Hildesheim, Germany, who engaged in dialogue with the local imam, and was delighted to be given a copy of the Qur'an. When the Bishop offered a Bible in return, the imam looked horrified and would not even touch the book. The reason for the imam's reaction was that his giving of the Qur'an to the Christian leader was an act of *da'wa* (mission). He understood the offering of the Bible to be an act of Christian mission which naturally he had to reject.

Tibi's point is that most dialogue is being carried on with conservative Muslims who are presenting themselves as moderates. Yet Muslim liberals like Tibi himself who are seeking a reformation within Islam and who have embraced western values, are now sadly being marginalised, not only by their conservative Muslim brethren but also by Church and government.

Christian-Muslim dialogue is always likely to be one-sided since Islam finds it difficult to accept that it does anything wrong, because of the shame and humiliation implied. By contrast, Christianity is quick to admit fault and take the blame. Bassam Tibi has written boldly about this. He says German

Muslims 'revel in the role of victims' and that Christian-Muslim dialogue in Germany has been characterised on the Muslim side by demands and accusations. The German Christians have been confronted with the faults of their past, but any discussion of the bloody history of Muslim *jihad* is considered taboo.

Another complication is that certain key vocabulary is understood differently by Muslims. There is a great risk of misunderstanding and talking at cross purposes. For example, to Muslims the word 'peace' carries with it nuances of establishing peace and order by spreading Islamic rule and authority across the globe, something like the *pax Romana*. Similarly, when Muslims claim that Islamic societies were historically tolerant of non-Islamic faiths, they mean that the non-Muslims were not killed or expelled and were allowed to continue to practise their faiths, albeit with various restrictions and a second-class status. This is very different from the modern western Judaeo-Christian understanding of 'tolerance' as implying equality.

Quite apart from genuine misunderstandings, another important factor is that Muslims are permitted to lie in certain circumstances, and to break their treaties with non-Muslims. Thus dialogue with Muslims is likely to be somewhat deficient in both justice and truth. This means that joint Christian-Muslim declarations have limited value.

Furthermore, it is clear that those who seek to prioritise reconciliation with Muslims, which may include apologising for the sins of former generations of Christians, are unwittingly laying a minefield for present and future Christians in vulnerable situations. It is very rare that Muslims react to such apologies with an apology in return. Far from impressing Muslims with the humble nature of Christianity, unguarded apologies which do not take into account historical facts serve to confirm conservative Muslims in their belief of their own rightness. Some Muslims may even interpret such Christian admissions of fault as a licence to punish them; the punishment is usually manifested in discrimination or physical violence against Christian minorities in Muslim contexts.

Working with Muslims

Much emphasis is currently being given to the need for Christians and Muslims to work together in areas of common concern (abortion, ecology,

the relief of poverty, etc.). It is argued that we share one world as human beings, and therefore we should talk and engage in acts of common service to humanity. But when engaging in such joint actions we need to be not only as innocent as doves but also as wise as serpents.

Traditionally there have been two viewpoints about Christians working with other groups to achieve social change. The first is to avoid working with non-Christians and simply to trust God and believe that he will work through Christian believers. The second is to work with like-minded people who are motivated by Christian principles whether or not they are committed Christians. A good example of the second is Wilberforce and the abolition of the slave trade.

Today, however, the second position is being broadened to include those of other faiths, particularly Muslims. The question arises as to why the limit should be drawn at adherents of world faiths. Why not include Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, or people of goodwill who are humanists and atheists? These would be just as capable of engaging in good works motivated by good values. Careful thought should be given to defining the boundaries of those we can work with, and great confusion is caused by emphasising faith groups as if they have values in common not shared by people without faith. This sends a message that all faiths are fundamentally the same. Where it is needful to engage in common causes—and this is becoming increasingly necessary in today's world—should not our aim be to work with people of goodwill (whether they have a faith or not) rather than specifically with people of faith e.g., Muslims? It is hard to find any warrant in the Bible for interfaith co-operation. In fact it can be argued that co-operation with other faiths actually led to the decline of Israel and brought judgement upon the people of God.

6. Islam and Christianity Compared

Central to this discussion is the issue of how much Islam and Christianity have in common in terms of beliefs and values. Some Christians in both the United States and the United Kingdom now describe interfaith meetings between Christians and Muslims as 'interdenominational', implying Islam is as close to Christianity as Christian denominations are to each other. Another contemporary catch-phrase is the 'Abrahamic faiths', which embraces Judaism, Christianity and Islam as if they were three siblings of

the same family. It is, in fact, an Islamic concept to group the three religions together, although the Islamic logic is not descent from Abraham but shared Scriptures. At first glance these faiths do appear to have much in common. These three, and only these three, believe in one God. They revere the Old Testament prophets, they believe in creation, the fall, angels, heaven and hell, and a day of judgement. They promote a sober, self-controlled lifestyle, a concern for the well-being of humanity, and the importance of prayer. Islam and Christianity can appear even closer, but look below the surface and some crucial differences emerge.

a. God

Many people ask whether Muslims and Christians believe in the same God, but it is more appropriate to ask what kind of God they each believe in i.e. what do they believe to be his character? As Christians we understand God by looking into the face of Jesus Christ. As has been observed, God is all Christlikeness and has nothing within him that is un-Christlike. We believe that ‘God is love’ and we see all other aspects of his character subsumed by that eternal, faithful, and unchanging love. ‘God so loved the world...’ begins what is reputed to be the best-known verse in the Bible. All through the Bible, and especially the New Testament, we read of God’s love.

But love is not a primary quality of Allah in the Qur’an. Allah’s defining characteristics are his transcendence, his otherness and his power. Whilst there is a verse of the Qur’an (Q 50:16) which speaks of Allah being as close as one’s jugular, immanence is not one of his qualities. Even his compassion and mercy, which are often cited in Islam, are not the permanent and dependable qualities that Christians see in God. Rather they indicate that Allah may on a whim be merciful, or he may not. Allah’s character has been compared to that of a desert sheikh, unapproachable, ruling his tribe with a rod of iron, but sometimes relenting. He certainly cannot show any weakness or vulnerability; he cannot suffer.

By contrast it is the Christian understanding that God, who is both transcendent and immanent, does suffer. Jurgen Moltmann wrote of “The Crucified God” and Kitamori produced his work on “The Theology of the Pain of God”. This is expressed in the Trinity. We believe that God the Son entered humanity, and the Son together with the Father sends out the Spirit, a triune God present and involved with suffering humanity.

b. Christ

Islam considers Jesus a sinless prophet and miracle-worker. The Qur'an even ascribes to him the title Messiah in no fewer than eleven places. Muslims believe in his virgin birth and ascension and look forward to his second coming (albeit as a man to marry and have children). Perhaps Muslims believe far more than many a clergyman or bishop! (As an aside, it is interesting to speculate whether some Christian leaders may unwittingly be preparing their flocks for ready conversion to Islam by preaching a deistic faith with a purely human Jesus.)

However, the Qur'an categorically denies the death of Christ on the cross (Q 4:156-158), his deity (Q 4:171) and his Sonship (Q 5:116). So Islam rejects the very heart of our Christian faith, that is, the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, his death on the cross for the sins of humanity, and his resurrection.

It is interesting that the symbol of the cross itself was hated by Muhammad, and still is by many Muslims today, including the London traffic warden who could not bring himself to wear his uniform. Islam teaches that when Jesus returns, which will be as a Muslim, he will break all the crosses.

c. Man

Islam teaches that humans were created by God out of clay. The Christian concept that we are made in the image of God, *imago dei*, is blasphemy to a Muslim, for whom God's otherness is one of his most important qualities. Islam believes in a structured order, differentiating between male and female, between Muslim, *dhimmi* (Jews and Christians) and pagan, etc. each category to be treated differently. (For example, 'Fight and slay the pagans wherever ye find them' Q 9:5). Thus they disagree profoundly with the Christian concept of the innate equality of all mankind because all are made in the image of God.

d. Salvation

In Islam salvation is through works. At death all one's good deeds and bad deeds are weighed in the divine scales. Judgement then follows. Muslims will ultimately get to heaven but most will have to spend some time in hell first. The only exceptions are those who die for the sake of Islam, for example the Palestinian suicide bombers, whom many Muslims regard as martyrs.

In rejecting Jesus' deity, his atoning death on the cross and his resurrection, the centrality of the Christian faith is therefore denied. Salvation for the Christian is not by works but by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

It is clear therefore that, although Islam and Christianity share some beliefs, they do not share the most important ones. Even where there is some shared ground the understanding is radically different.

Turning now to a consideration of the values of Christianity and Islam, it is important to remember that Muslims do not believe that humans are created in the divine image. Muslims believe that all humans are equal in terms of their nature before Allah, all being created from clay, but they are not equal in terms of faith. The outworking of this in Muslim ethics and morality is that all humans are not of equal status or worth. Women and non-Muslims are of lesser value, and this is clearly seen in many aspects of Shari'ah. Pagans are to be converted or killed, while Jews and Christians (dhimmi) are permitted to live within Islamic society and practise their faith, but as second class citizens. They are subject to numerous regulations to limit their rights and freedoms and reinforce the message of their inferior status as a conquered people.

Another key area of difference in values is that of the external and internal manifestations of faith. Christianity is primarily a personal and internal faith, emphasising inner freedom. Christians seek to be salt and light within society, but they do not have a blueprint for Christian political structures and governance. By contrast, orthodox Islam is primarily a religion of externals, in which outward conformity to rigid, inflexible rules is more important than the attitude of the heart. It is no surprise therefore that Islam has a very firm idea of how a state should be organised and run which is set out in the Shari'ah. Many devout Muslims are conscious that it is their duty to try to create such a state.

In Islam the absoluteness of God demands a submissive people—his *ummah*. His law is the central unifying force. There is no individuality, no choice, and no ability ultimately to change. Hence the problem of conversion from Islam where the convert is regarded as committing high treason and therefore to be executed. Islam is a one-way street which can be entered but not left. Even so-called moderates such as Sheikh Muhammad Sayid

Tantawi of Al-Azhar University, Cairo, continue to affirm that the convert can be killed if he or she belittles or injures Islam. Christianity, on the other hand, while recognising a Christian community—the body of Christ—places the emphasis on an individual's choice to love God issuing in loving service to humanity. The individual chooses either to love God and to follow him or to reject him. It is not for the community to decide.

Conclusion

Since September 11th, 2001, Islam has been reinterpreted as a religion of peace, tolerance and non-violence. The theology of *jihad* and *Dar ul-Harb* has been conveniently re-written. Islam is presented almost as a refined version of Christianity, free of all the complicated theology and the history of past failures.

The British Church is at present particularly vulnerable to this kind of advance. As Colin Bennetts, Bishop of Coventry, has stated—the primary doctrine under question today is that of christology. Without a right christological understanding, British Christians are almost certain to lose their encounter with Islam. If this encounter is lost, there will be serious implications for society, Church, mission and the suffering Church in the Muslim world.

With regard to British society, the question is whether Islam and Christianity can continue to co-exist given that each has such a different understanding of society. It is very difficult for Muslims to embrace a society guided by contemporary international norms of human rights rather than by a medieval religious law (the Shari'ah), a society where religion and state are not totally interlinked. It is far from clear whether, in the long term, Muslims can integrate into our society on an individual basis, or whether they can only do so at a communal level with a parallel Muslim society running alongside non-Muslim society.

The Church has succumbed dramatically in the face of the Islamic agenda. Unless she rallies herself to explain her own distinctiveness, to be true and faithful to the Christian beliefs and doctrines, she will find she has sacrificed biblical truths for the sake of political correctness. If Christians accept the liberal approach that other faiths, particularly Islam, are of equal value and validity with Christianity, can any mandate remain for mission to Muslims?

Indeed, is there any reason for Christians not to convert to Islam?

The suffering Church in the Muslim world faces intense and growing persecution. If the Church in Britain yields fully to Islam, it will have repercussions for the Church in the Muslim world, which has been persecuted since the advent of Islam. For if the British Church will not recognise the true nature of Islam and its essential antagonism to the Gospel and to Christians, if she will not risk alienating the Muslim community in Britain, then she will end up sooner or later betraying and abandoning her persecuted brothers and sisters.

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ENDNOTES

1. A Muslim visionary who had a key involvement in the creation of Pakistan.
2. Alan Redpath, "The Fresh Air of Theological Liberalism," *The Reader* (Autumn 2002): 6-7.
3. For example, the version of "God is working his purpose out" which appears in *Hymns Old and New*.
4. 15 May 2002.
5. Tibi, Bassam "Christian-Muslim dialogue rests on deceit—and furthers western wishful thinking," *Die Zeit*, 29 May, 2002, p. 9. Other quotes from Tibi are from the same source.
6. Interview in the *Muslim News*, (28 June, 2002).
7. The *Church of England Newspaper*, (18 July, 2002).