

Lighting up the Way

The Christian New Testament and the Islamic Qur'an: a comparison

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PART ONE: SETTING THE SCENE.

This article aims to compare the Christian New Testament and the Islamic Qur'an. It is not a comparison of Christianity and Islam. There is a lot more to Christianity than can be found in the Christian New Testament, and there is a lot more to Islam than can be found in the Qur'an. I am thinking of the values of tradition, culture, community, and family. As regards Islam, when it expanded beyond Arabia, need for direction led to the growth of the Sunnah: traditions about Muhammad's teachings and actions, including other sayings attributed to Muhammad, hundreds of thousands of them, that are not found in the Qur'an. I have chosen to limit my focus to the Qur'an because of its special place in Islam and to the Christian New Testament because of its special place in Christianity.

I have a working knowledge of Biblical Greek and so can read the Greek New Testament. A huge disadvantage for this article is that I do not know Arabic. My main source for this study has been *The Study Quran: a new translation and commentary*, Editor-in-chief Seyyed Hossein Nasr, HarperCollins 2015 (1996 pages). The English in this translation leaves a lot to be desired, but I chose to stay with it, so that the reader can be confident that when I am quoting from the Qur'an I am using a translation that is approved by leading Islamic scholars. All quotations from the Qur'an come from *The Study Quran* and are printed in *italics* throughout. An even more important limitation is that my tradition is not Muslim, and there is always a danger in reading religious texts as an outsider, however open and sympathetic one may hope to be. If a reader can point out where I have failed to understand the Qur'an properly, please let me know so that I can make any necessary corrections.

Because on the level of human interaction Muslims and Christians can share many values, my intention has been to study the New Testament and the Qur'an with a view to writing something that, in however small a way, might help Christians and Muslims appreciate each other's religious heritage. The world, our common home, needs us to share our insights, to help one another correct what may be wrong in our thinking (including what we think about each other), to rejoice in what we share, and to respect one another in our differences.

There are a number of communities that look to the Christian New Testament for inspiration. I am a Catholic Christian, but I hope that all Christians will be at home with what I have to say about the New Testament. Likewise, there are a number of communities that look to the Qur'an for inspiration. I pray that any Muslim will be at home with what I have to say about the Qur'an.

1. God's revelation and religious texts

We begin by noting the radical difference in the way Christian Scholars read the New Testament and Muslim Scholars read the Qur'an.

Christian Scholars acknowledge the necessary limitations of any text that claims to be inspired. When inspired authors open their minds and hearts to welcome God's Self-revelation they have insights into the presence and action of God. When they give expression to these insights, the expression comes from the inspired author. Christian scholars know

that, since it is a human expression of religious insight, it carries with it the limitations inherent in any language or culture. Religious texts must be understood within the context of the situation in which the revelation occurs. The Gospels and the Letters of the New Testament are the responses to Jesus of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, James, and the other authors. Christians treat Jesus' words and actions found in the Gospels with the greatest respect for they offer a privileged window into the way Jesus' disciples came to see him. We believe that it is Jesus himself who reveals God. The written words of the Christian New Testament are treasured by Christians because they judge them to point in an authentic way to Jesus, the revelation of God. Nevertheless, they are words written by people who belonged in the culture of their time.

Raymond Brown, a leading Catholic Biblical Scholar, writes: 'The Bible is the literary objectification of a faith that is a response to revelation' (*Theological Studies* 1981, page 9). The Bible is not the revelation. It is the inspired author's response to the revelation. Brown goes on to define Scripture as "divine revelation to which human beings have given expression in words' (page 13). Michael Schmaus, a Catholic theologian agrees: 'What we encounter in the Sacred Scriptures is first of all the objectivization of the belief in and understanding of Christ which was possessed by the Church or the local congregation. In other words, it is the answer to the revelation of God. In this answer, however, the word of God itself is expressed, for this word has entered into the answer of the Church and is effective in it. On the other hand we must not forget that God's word, which enters into our human answer of faith, nevertheless always transcends it' (*Dogma Volume 1* page 188).

The Qur'an is divided into 114 sūrahs (perhaps best translated as 'sections'). Many of them move through a number of themes and contain material from different periods. Apart from Sūrah 1 which has a special place in the Qur'an, the sūrahs are arranged according to length. Sūrah 2 is the longest. Sūrah 114 is the shortest.

Muslim scholars read the Qur'an as coming directly from God. Muhammad is the medium chosen by God. He is seen as a pure medium who adds nothing of his own that could obscure the pure light of divine revelation. Jelal al-Din al-Rumi, a thirteenth century Sufi saint (we will have more to say about him later), has this to say about how we should approach the Qur'an: 'The Qur'an is like a shy bride. Although you pull aside her veil, she will not show you her face. The reason you have no pleasure or discovery in all your study of it is that it rejects your attempt to pull off its veil. It tricks you and shows itself to you as ugly, as if to say, "I am not that beauty." It is capable of showing any face it wants. If, on the other hand, you do not tug at the veil, but you acquiesce, give water to its sown field, do it service from afar, and try to do what pleases it without pulling at its veil, it will show you its face. "Seek the people of God, enter among my servants; and enter my paradise" [*Sūrah* 89:29-30]. God does not speak to just anyone. Like kings who appoint viziers and deputies through whom people can reach them, so has God selected a certain servant to the end that whoever seeks God can find Him through that servant. All the prophets have come for the sole reason that they are the way' (*Fihī ma fihī, Discourse 8*).

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, an Iranian-American philosopher, theologian and Islamic scholar, is professor of Islamic studies at George Washington University. He is the General Editor of *The Study Qûran*. In his *Ideals and Realities of Islam* he has this to say: '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 a virgin. The human vehicle of a Divine Message must be pure and untainted. The Divine Word can be written only on the pure and "untouched" tablet of human receptivity. If this Word is in the form of flesh the purity is symbolised by the virginity of the mother who gives birth to the Word, and if it is in the form of a book this purity is symbolised by the unlettered nature of the person who is chosen to announce the Word among men ... The unlettered nature of the Prophet demonstrates how the human recipient is completely passive before the Divine. Were this purity and virginity of the soul not to exist, the Divine Word would in a sense become tainted with purely human knowledge and not be presented to mankind in its pristine purity.'

Kabir Helminski, author of *"The Knowing Heart; a Sufi Path of Transformation"*, reverences the Qur'an as Divine Revelation, a pure guide to the Truth, and sees Muhammad as a saint. He sees the Qur'an as an 'upflowing of meaning from the purest depths of the unconscious' (page 61).

As I hope to show, there are many very beautiful statements in the Qur'an. If this were not the case Islam would not be still nourishing people who are searching for truth and love. Islam would not still be producing saints. But I will be quoting from the Qur'an sentiments that do not appear to come 'from the purest depths.' Helminski claims that 'abusive conduct was never the method of Muhammad' (page 138). Is this true? He claims that 'Qur'anic revelation is a pure inexhaustible spring of wisdom and guidance' (page 162). Of course, there is much wisdom and guidance, but is it all pure? Speaking of the amazing spread of Islam, Helminski states: 'The Qur'an and the prophet magnetized a backward and feuding people until their spiritual conviction and commitment to social justice spread throughout the known world in little more than a century' (page 163). This is putting an extraordinarily rosy view of the spread of Islam!

Helminski claims that 'the Qur'an is a book without internal contradiction' (page 164). Is this true? The Qur'an itself has no problem with contradictions in the text. God is free, and God can reveal one thing and then reveal something that contradicts it. God is not bound by our human logic. 'No sign do We [that is 'God'] abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but that We bring that which is better than it or like unto it. Do you not know that God is Powerful over all things?' (Sûrah 2:106).

Muslim commentators explain that *naskh*, translated here as 'abrogate', (it can mean 'postpone' or 'replace') is a technical term used to explain contradictory commands and prohibitions that occur in the Qur'an and the Sunnah. The commentary in *The Study Quran* states (page 49 column 1): 'Other verses often mentioned in this connection are "God effaces what He will and establishes, and with Him is the Mother of the Book" (Sûrah 13:39 ?); "When We replace one sign with another – and God knows best what He sends down" (Sûrah 16:101) and "If We willed We could take away that which We revealed unto thee" (Sûrah 17:86).

The problem with the principle of abrogation (*al-nasikh wa-l-mansukh*) is finding criteria to establish which sûrahs have been abrogated. Some opt for the more peaceful sûrahs, revealed in the early years of Islam while Muhammad was still living in Mecca, but have to allow that the more aggressive sûrahs which were revealed in Medina, in the last ten years of

Muhammad's life, are not ruled out by the Qur'an. Others opt for the more aggressive sūrah's, but have to allow that the more tolerant sūrah's which were revealed when Muhammad was in Mecca are not ruled out by the Qur'an. The problem is increased when we look at the hadith, which are littered with contradictory statements claiming to come from Muhammad.

If the understanding of revelation that I am proposing has value, the explanation of the contradictions is to be sought, not by asserting that God is above logic and is free to replace one revelation with a contradictory one, but by focusing on the changed circumstances within which Muhammad received the revelations. Any revelation is received by a human being, who grasps it and expresses it according to circumstances of time and place and situation. Christians hold that, while reason and logic cannot comprehend reality, they must be respected. Revelation goes beyond reason but cannot contradict reason.

Helminski claims: 'The voice of the Qur'an is certainly not the voice of Muhammad' (page 198). In other words, it is the voice of God. Muhammad is simply the messenger. Any religious group that claims that its holy texts come directly from God, bypassing the limitations of the person who conveys the words, is, in the view of Christian scholars, failing to appreciate the reality of inspiration. People live at a certain period of history, in a certain culture and with a certain language. When an inspired person gives expression to the inspiration in words, the words are human and need to be understood in context.

Muhammad and his followers see Muhammad as God's Messenger, who received the revelation from God through the Angel Gabriel (*Sūrah's* 26:192-194; 75:17-19; 96:1). Muslims see the Qur'an, the written text, as '*the revelation of the Book from God, the Mighty, the Wise*' (*Sūrah* 45:1). This makes God directly responsible for what is written in the Qur'an, without taking into consideration the limits of language, the limits of Muhammad's understanding, and the limits of the historical and cultural context of the time.

If we step away from this understanding, we might recognise Muhammad as, among other things, a mystic who had an experience of the Oneness of God. We could also appreciate the many values that are expressed in the Qur'an (for example, the importance of prayer, of almsgiving, of care for the poor, for orphans and widows and strangers), but we could also see the limited historical context that is expressed in some of the views expressed in the Qur'an.

There are schools of Islamic wisdom that speak of reading the Qur'an in a non-literal sense, looking for a deeper meaning in the text. Muhyiddin ibn Arabi 'explained that just as water necessarily reflects the colour of its container, so theophanies are conditioned by the container that receives them and whose form they take on' (quoted by Husain page 243). However, such thinking appears powerless against those who, like the Salafi and Wahhabi jihadis, choose to read the Qur'an literally, and insist that other Muslims who do not follow them are infidels.

2. The Salafi and Wahhabi sects

From a Christian perspective a major problem that makes dialogue difficult is that Islam has in recent times been hijacked by Salafi and Wahhabi sects. The Salafi sect developed in Egypt in the late 19th century as a response to European imperialism. It has roots in the 18th century Wahhabi movement that originated in the Najd region of modern-day Saudi Arabia. The Salafi and Wahhabi sects make up only about 5% of Islam but their determination to wipe out non-Muslims and to force their violent interpretation of the Qur'an on other Muslims has skewed a lot of people's view of Islam. This can easily feed the impression that there is no common ground and no hope of productive dialogue. The only solution, according to some, is to meet violence with greater violence.

Just as it is necessary for followers of Jesus to be critical of those who in the name of Christianity reject non-Christians and other Christians who do not agree with their views, so it is important that the Muslim community distance itself from those who, in the name of Islam, attack non-Muslims and Muslims who do not agree with their determination, in the name of Islam, to wipe out all who disagree with them.

A Muslim scholar, Ed Husain, in his book *'The House of Islam: a Global History'* (Bloomsbury Publishing 2018) defines jihadis as those who are committed to purify Muslims who they claim have drifted from the true faith. Jihadis see themselves as being loyal to Islam by opposing infidels. Being on friendly terms with non-Muslims is prohibited. Instead of following the traditional understanding in Islam that behaviour is permitted unless explicitly prohibited, they teach that everything is prohibited unless explicitly permitted. They go so far as to declare Muslims who do not agree with them to be unbelievers, who are to be killed. It is not enough for them to leave judgment to God in the next life. They are committed to create God's government here on earth according to their understanding of *shari'ah* law (*'shari'ah*: the way to the water).

Husain writes: 'The attraction of Islam lies in the simplicity of its message of worship of one God, a preserved Quran, an honoured Prophet, a celebrated family life, and emphasis on the soul's journey to a next life' (page 249). 'The centrality of God, the vibrancy of the Quran, the preservation of the rights of the sacred, the institutions of the family and the firm public belief in the afterlife all provide an unshakable bedrock for the Muslim believer from generation to generation' (page 265).

He goes on to state: "We cannot reverse the rising tide of jihadism unless we uproot its theology and ideology ... As long as the House of Islam provides shelter for Salafi jihadis the rest of the world will attack Islam and Muslims ... As long as Muslims tolerate their presence, we will give licence even to the ideologues in both the East and West to conflate Islam with Salafi-jihadism. More Muslims will turn to jihadism, and another generation will be lost. We need to cleanse our mosques, publishing houses, schools, websites, satellite TV stations, madrasses and ministries of Salafi-jihadi influences. Unless we do Islamophobia will continue to rise, and we cannot complain when the West repeatedly suggests that Muslims are suspect. Unless we do, no matter how much Muslims protest, they will continue to share the opprobrium heaped on those who claim to represent us. Unless we do, we cannot credibly claim that they have nothing to do with us. Sadly, they do come from within us" (page 280).

3. The Sufi way

Just as there have always been, and still are, extraordinarily holy people in all branches of Christianity, so it is for Islam. I would like to begin by offering hope by recalling one among a number of movements within Islam that are especially open to Christianity and committed to peace. I have found inspiration in the writings of some followers of the Muslim Sufi way, which focuses especially on the spiritual, mystic dimension of the Islamic faith.

The Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopalian priest, in her Introduction to *Prayer of the Heart in Christian and Sufi Mysticism*, by a Sufi author, Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee (2012), writes: 'Sufism arose in the cradle of Islam to receive and nurture those teachings of the heart that had first been planted in those Near-Eastern lands directly from the living heart of Jesus. Sufism and Christianity are joined at the heart ... They are kindred pathways of transfiguration through love. Both traditions picture the spiritual journey with the same core metaphor: as a cosmic love song that begins in exile and ends in divine intimacy.' In "*The Knowing Heart: a Sufi Path of Transformation*" (1999), the Sufi, Kabir Helminski, writes: 'The lives and teachings of Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad have influenced and transformed so many billions of people because they are essentially teachings of love' (page 40).

Especially inspiring is the love poetry of the Sufi saint Jelal al-Din al-Rumi (1207-1273). In his 492 page book: *Rumi, the Big Red Book: the great masterpiece celebrating mystical love and friendship* (HarperOne 2010), Coleman Barks tells why he was drawn to the Sufis: 'I have been drawn to the Sufis for their emphasis on the numinous as it transpires through beauty and harmony, and love. I find that when I am around them (and around Taoist and Zen masters too) the possessiveness of the ego lessens and I feel joy overflowing through the createdness. And that feels like the soul's truth' (page 325).

Barks also describes what Rumi's son, Sultan Velad, felt when Shams, Rumi's spiritual teacher and intimate friend, spoke the Qur'an and the sayings of Muhammad to him: 'He sowed new love in my soul. He revealed secrets. He made me fly without wings and reach the ocean with no boundaries where I found peace and, like a bird freed from a trap, felt safe from all dangers' (*Veladnama*, quoted Barks, page 324). How many Muslims over the centuries have been similarly moved by listening to the Qur'an! Rumi is beautifully respectful of Jesus and of the Christian New Testament. He writes: 'The miracle of Jesus is himself' (quoted Barks page 335). 'Inside the friend, where rose and thorn blend, to one opening point, the Qur'an, the New Testament and the Old, flow together to become one text' (quoted Barks page 426). Rumi's key insight is perhaps best expressed when he writes: 'Is there love, a drawing together of any kind, that is not sacred' (quoted Barks, page 16).

Husain writes of Muhyiddin ibn 'Arabi, a contemporary of Rumi: 'He had, like many Sufis, a special inclination toward the spiritual Jesus: "Jesus was my first master on the way; it was in his hands that I was converted. He watches over me at all hours, not leaving me for a second ... I often met him in my visions; it was with him that I repented: he commanded me to practise asceticism and renunciation" (*al-Futuhatal-Makkiya: The Meccan Revelations*, quoted page 241). "He whom I [God] love, I am the eye with which he sees, the ears with which he listens" (quoted Husain page 243). "Ibn Arabi is remembered to this day across the Muslim world for these verses that he wrote in Mecca – for, like Rumi, Ibn Arabi found God in love: 'My heart has become

capable of all forms: a prairie for gazelles, a convent for monks, a temple of idols, a Ka'bah for the pilgrim, the tablets of the Torah, the Book of the Quran. I profess the religion of Love, and, regardless of which direction its steed may lead, Love is my religion and my faith' (quoted Husain page 243).

4. Christians can learn from Muslims.

The Second Vatican Council reminds us: 'Whatever good is found sown in people's minds and hearts or in the rites and customs of peoples, these are not only preserved from destruction, but are purified, elevated and perfected for the glory of God' (*Lumen Gentium*, 1964, n. 17). Pope Paul VI reminds us that 'people can gain salvation also in other ways, by God's mercy, even though we do not preach the Gospel to them' (*Evangelisation in the Modern World*, 1975, n.80). Our privilege as Jesus' disciples is to continue his mission, telling others of him and drawing them into the embrace of his love. While we are faithful to the mission given us, we know that his love is not limited to our efforts. Pope Paul writes: 'The Church respects and esteems these non-Christian religions because they are the living expression of the soul of vast groups of people. They carry within them the echo of thousands of years of searching for God, a quest which is incomplete but often made with great sincerity and righteousness of heart. They possess an impressive patrimony of deeply religious texts. They have taught generations of people how to pray. They are all impregnated with innumerable 'seeds of the Word' and can constitute a true 'preparation for the Gospel' (n.53).

In his *Mission of the Redeemer*, 1990, Pope John-Paul II writes: 'The Second Vatican Council recalls that the Spirit is at work in the heart of every person, through the "seeds of the Word", to be found in human initiatives – including religious ones – and in the human effort to attain truth, goodness, and God himself ... The Spirit is at the very source of people's existential and religious questioning, a questioning which is occasioned not only by contingent situations but by the very structure of what it is to be human ... The Spirit is animating, purifying, and reinforcing the noble aspirations which drive the human family to make its life one that is more human and to direct the whole earth to this end. It is the Spirit who sows the 'seeds of the Word' present in various customs and cultures' (n. 28).

Pope John-Paul II continues: 'We must have respect for human beings in their quest for answers to the deepest questions of life, and respect for the action of the Holy Spirit in people ... Every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit who is mysteriously present in every human heart' (n. 29). 'God does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression, even when they contain gaps, insufficiencies and errors ... Dialogue with those of other religions is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills' (n. 55-56).

When it comes to community we have a lot to learn from our Muslim brothers and sisters. Increasingly in the 'Christian West' there is immense pressure to identify religion as an individual affair. The human hunger for personal, and therefore communal, identity is expressed in the song 'I am, you are, we are, Australian'. The sporting stadiums witness to this. An argument can be made to connect the individualizing of religion and the modern epidemic of loneliness and anxiety. Muslims see this for what it is: a profound cultural weakness. They have a lot to teach us here.

5. Muhammad and the Qur'an

Muhammad was born in Mecca, Arabia, in 570AD. His father 'Abdullah died before his birth, and his mother Aminah died when he was six years old. He was cared for first by his grandfather and then by his uncle. In 595AD he married Khadija bint Khuwaylid. They had two sons, who died as children, and four daughters. After the death of Khadija in 619 Muhammad had many wives.

Muhammad used to retire to a cave on Mount Hira (see *Sûrah 96*). His first 'vision' was in 610AD, when he was forty (see the account of his first vision in *The Study Quran* pages 1535-1536). For the next twenty-two years till his death, aged sixty-two, he saw himself, and his disciples saw him, as a man inspired (*Sûrah 6:50, 6:107; 18:111; 35:19; 46:9*). Speaking to Muhammad God says: *'We placed thee upon a clear path'* (*Sûrah 45:18*). The Arabic word translated here as 'clear path' is *shari'ah* [an avenue that leads to water]. It is the only time this word occurs in the Qur'an. It came to be used for Muslim law, which claims to place those who submit *'on a clear path.'* *'Did We not expand for thee thy breast, and lift from thee thy burden that weighed heavily upon thy back? And did We not elevate thy renown? For truly with hardship comes ease! Truly with hardship comes ease! So when thou art free exert thyself; and let thy desire be for your Lord'* (*Sûrah 94*).

Muhammad aspired to follow the religion of Abraham (*Sûrah 16:123*). *'Truly Abraham was clement, tender-hearted, penitent'* (*Sûrah 11:75*). Muhammad saw himself as being called by God to draw Jews, Christians and the polytheistic tribes of Arabia to follow faithfully the religion of Abraham. Jesus challenged his contemporaries: *'If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did'* (*John 8:39*). Paul speaks of *'those who share the faith of Abraham who is the father of all of us'* (*Romans 4:16*). Muhammad accepted Moses and Jesus as vehicles of God's revelation (see *Sûrah 4:150*). He saw his role as God's chosen instrument in converting Arabian polytheistic tribes to faith in the One God, and cleansing Judaism and Christianity of what he judged to be accretions that had brought about division (see *Sûrah 5:14*), and what he judged to be distortion of the revelations made through Moses and Jesus (see *Sûrah 3:55*). He saw himself as being in the line of the prophets, sent to warn the people and to condemn the pagan Arabs, the Jews and the Christians who refused to accept the warning given to them by God through him (*Sûrah 35:42*), by refusing to join the *'believers'* (*al-mu'minun*), who surrendered to God (*muslimun*).

From 610 to 623 Muhammad lived in Mecca. Typically, the revelations from that period tend to be more respectful of Jews and Christians. He was trying to win them over to submit to the One God and to himself as God's chosen messenger. *Sûrah 16:125* is one among many examples: *'Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation. And dispute with them in the most virtuous manner. Surely your Lord is He who knows best those who stray from His way and knows best the rightly guided.'*

Those who rejected Muhammad considered him *'possessed'* (*Sûrahs 68:2, 51; 81:22*). They mocked him (*Sûrah 15:11*) and made a jest of what he claimed to be his revelations (*Sûrah 18:107*), which required of them that they reject their traditional gods.

In 623 Muhammad left Mecca and fled to Yathrib, a journey of 300km. This 'flight' (*Hijrah*) marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar. Yathrib came to be called 'Medina' ('The City'). It was his base for the last ten years of his life, during which he was the head of a growing, social, political, and religious community. From 623-627 he was involved in a fight to the death with his own tribe, the Quraysh of Mecca. From this conflict he and his followers finally emerged victorious. Muhammad himself took part in twenty-seven military campaigns between his arrival at Medina and his death in 632AD. During his years in Medinah Muhammad acted as a warlord. Sûrah 59 refers to the Banu Nadir, a Jewish tribe of Medina, who were exiled for having broken their treaty, and had their property confiscated. In his biography of Muhammad, Ibn Hisham (*died 833AD*) describes how Muhammad participated in the beheading of more than six hundred males of another Jewish tribe, the Banu Quraydhah (*see Interroger L'Islam by Abbé Guy Pagès, page 171*). None of this is surprising when we consider the violent times in which Muhammad lived. Problems arise when we are asked to believe that he behaved in this way in response to God's instructions.

Sûrah 3 records a number of early significant battles involving Muhammad and his followers. The Muslims are not to lose heart for *'If you are slain or die, truly unto God you shall be gathered ... Truly God loves those who trust' ... Deem not those who slain in the way of God to be dead. Rather they are alive with their Lord'* (verses 158-159 and 169). Insofar as this is speaking of Muslims killed because of their faith, it would find parallels in Christian teaching about martyrdom. Paul, facing death, could pray: 'I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him' (2 Timothy 1:12). Peter writes: 'Through Jesus you have come to trust in God, who raised Jesus from the dead and have him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God' (1 Peter 1:21). However, as we will see later, *'the way of God'* in the Qur'an can be interpreted as including the use of violence to propagate Islam and eliminate disbelievers. To call dying in this cause 'martyrdom' is problematic.

The revelations from the Medina period tend to have a harsher feel about them than the revelations of the Mecca period. Sûrah 9:5 is an example: *'When the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wheresoever you find them, capture them, besiege them, and lie in wait for them in every place of ambush.'*

Khalif Abu Bakr al-Siddiq was the first successor to Muhammad (632-634). He was succeeded by 'Umar ibn al-Khattâb (634-644; *see Sûrah 20*), and then by 'Uthman ibn 'Affâ (644-656). It was 'Uthman who gathered the seven most famous memorisers of the 'revelations'. From them and from the many documentary remains and memories 'Uthman established the official edition of the Qur'an. Because the text was a consonantal text, lacking vowels, there are many words that are capable of more than one meaning.

This is a very different process from the way the Christian New Testament was formed. The Qur'an claims to be a record of revelations given to Muhammad, and to Muhammad alone, through the Angel Gabriel. A Muslim is a person who submits to this revelation, accepting it as God's final revelation, and accepting Muhammad as God's Messenger. The Qur'an is foundational for Islam. Foundational to Christian faith is Jesus. Memories of Jesus and reflections on his significance circulated orally for over thirty years before the composition of the Gospels. The New Testament is a beautiful fruit of Christian faith. Christian faith is a

sharing in the faith of the early disciples. This faith is expressed in the New Testament , and is a sharing in the faith of Jesus.

Another difference between the Qur'an and the New Testament is how the decision was made as to which books are to be accepted as authentic. 'Uthman decided for the Qur'an. For the New Testament it was a matter of which books rang true to people's memories of Jesus and to the faith of the community. Such books were copied and distributed and cherished. Other writings were neglected. Usage by Christian communities was the deciding factor. 'Uthman was succeeded by 'Ali, the husband of Muhammad's daughter, Fatima. 'Ali was assassinated in 661. His son, with seventy-two companions, was killed at Karbala (*in today's Iraq*). This led to the Sunni-Shi'a schism: the Shi'a look to 'Ali.

The Rasidun Caliphate of Medina was succeeded by the Umayyad Caliphate of Damascus (661-750).

6. The Muslim Qur'an and the Jewish Scriptures

A thorough comparison between the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an is beyond the scope of this article, but some basic points need to be made, for only a renewed respect among the three so-called Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) can put an end to the practice by interested parties of putting a religious face on the political, social and economic conflicts that divide our world.

There are many parallels in the way God is portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the Qur'an. Comparisons can be made between the tribal conditions of Ancient Israel and the tribal conditions of seventh century Arabia. Violence, for example, was endemic to both. Furthermore, Judaism and Islam have a similar structure as religions. This is not surprising when we see Muhammad's familiarity with Jewish writings. Both religions have a prophet (Moses, Muhammad), a sacred Scripture (the Tanach, the Qur'an), and both religions recognise our human obligation to believe, and to submit to the will of God as revealed through the prophets, the messengers sent by God.

Muhammad's acquaintance with the Jewish Scriptures becomes obvious when we note that there are one hundred and fourteen sūrahs (sections) of the Qur'an, and in forty-six of them there are references to stories and legends from the Jewish Scriptures. These are almost entirely from the narratives about Creation, the Patriarchs and Moses. It is not evident from the Qur'an that Muhammad was familiar with the writings of the Israelite prophets, or the Wisdom literature. He mentions the Psalms (*Sūrahs 17:55; 34:10; 35:25*), but it is not evident that he was familiar with their content.

Sūrah 7 draws heavily on the Jewish Scriptures: the story of the fall of Adam and Eve (7:27-28); the story of Noah (7:59); the destruction of Sodom (7:80-84); Moses, the Pharaoh, and the plagues of Egypt (7:103-137); the crossing of the Red Sea (7:138); the giving of the Torah (7:142-145); the worship of the golden calf (7:148-154); the 70 men given the gift of prophesy (7:155); Moses striking the rock (7:160); and the manna from heaven (7:160).

Like the Book of Genesis the Qur'an presents God as creating the universe 'in six days' (*Sūrahs 10:4; 32:4*). It focuses on the creation of the human race (*see especially Sūrahs 15 and 32:7-9*). It

speaks of the fall of Adam and Eve, and the conflict between the sons of Adam (*Sûrah 5:27-30*). One of the Qur'an's recurring stories is that of Noah and the flood (*Sûrahs 37:75-77; 71*). Noah is seen as a type of Muhammad, and the punishment of the flood is presented as a warning to Muhammad's contemporaries who refused to believe the revelations that God was making through him (e.g., *Sûrahs 11, 23, 25 and 29*). The Qur'an speaks of Abraham, the father of the Arab peoples through Ishmael (*Sûrahs 19:54-5; 38.49*). Abraham is presented as the first Muslim (*Sûrahs 15, 19; 37:83-113*). Another of the Qur'an's recurring subjects is the story of Lot who was saved by God when the cities of the Dead Sea were destroyed (*Sûrahs 15:51-74; 25; 29; 37:133-138*). Muhammad sees what happened to Sodom as a warning to his contemporaries not to reject the revelation God is giving them through him. He knows of the patriarchs Isaac and Jacob (*Sûrah 19*), Joseph (*Sûrah 12*), and Ishmael (*Sûrah 2:125, 136*).

Drawing on the Book of Exodus the Qur'an speaks of Moses (see *Sûrahs 2, 17, 19, 20, 23, 26, 28, 32 and 33*). Moses' confrontation with the pharaoh of Egypt prefigures for Muhammad his confrontation with the pagan Arabs (*Sûrahs 20 and 26*). The Qur'an mentions David (*Sûrah 33:10 and 38:18-27 – see 2 Kings*), the Queen of Sheba (*Sûrah 27:22-44 – see 2 Kings*), and Solomon (*Sûrah 34:12 and 38:31-41 – see 2 Kings*). It mentions from 1 Kings Elijah (*Sûrah 37:123-132*) and Elisha (*Sûrah 38:49*). It knows of Job (*Sûrahs 21 and 38:42-45*), Jonah (*Sûrah 10:99 and 37:139-148 – another of its recurring stories*) and Ezra (*Sûrah 9*).

Sûrah 14 speaks of God's choice of Abraham and Moses, and the importance of heeding what God revealed through them. The Qur'an is the fulfilment of revelation: *'This is a Book that we have sent down unto thee, that thou mightest bring forth mankind out of darkness into light, by the leave of their Lord, to the path of the Mighty, the Praised'* (*Sûrah 14:1*). We find this theme of darkness and light repeated often in the Christian Gospels. Jesus said to a leading Jew: "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God" (*John 3:19-21*).

According to the Hebrew Scriptures, God chose to overturn cultural expectations by achieving his purpose, not through his firstborn son, Ishmael, but through his second son, Isaac. However, the Hebrew Scriptures also speak of the covenant made with Noah in which God expressed God's commitment to all the peoples of the earth. Furthermore, a careful reading of the Hebrew Scriptures clearly shows that God's choice of Isaac did not involve a rejection of Ishmael. Abraham never rejected Ishmael; nor did God. On the contrary God blessed Ishmael in a special way. This is critically important when we examine the often-fraught relationship between Judaism and Islam, so it may be worth underlining this point by examining the Biblical narrative as found in the Book of Genesis.

As the story goes, when Abraham's wife, Sarah, was unable to conceive, she persuaded Abraham to have a child with her maidservant, Hagar. However, when Hagar conceived, Sarah was overwhelmed with envy and 'dealt harshly with her' (*Genesis 16:6*). The words 'dealt harshly' are used for the way the Egyptians treated the Hebrews in Egypt (*Exodus 1:11-12*)! The Biblical account ensures that our sympathy as we read the narrative is not with Sarah. It is with Hagar who runs away to avoid harsh treatment from Sarah. The angel of the LORD, we are told, appeared to Hagar and told her to go back, but added: "I will so greatly multiply your

offspring that they cannot be counted. Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the LORD has given heed to your affliction" (*Genesis 16:9-10*). There are echoes here of the Promise made earlier to Abraham: 'Look toward heaven and count the stars. So shall your descendants be' (*Genesis 15:5*). We are told that the place of the encounter was called 'Beer-lahai-roi' (the well of the One who lives and sees') because Hagar was seen by and saw the LORD and lived (*Genesis 16:13-14*). This place will appear later in the story (*Genesis 24:62*).

When God promised Abraham that Sarah would bear him a son, Abraham pleaded: 'O that Ishmael would live in your sight' (*Genesis 17:18*). God replied: 'As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac' (*Genesis 17:20-21*). The 'twelve princes' parallel the twelve sons of Jacob. There is an echo here of God's first words to Abraham: 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (*Genesis 12:1-3*).

Abraham had a feast to celebrate the weaning of Isaac. Ishmael joined in the celebration and was 'laughing' with baby Isaac. Once again Sarah's bitterness shows, and she demands that Abraham banish Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham, we are told, was greatly distressed, but God tells him to do as Sarah demanded. Hagar and her son were banished and 'wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba' (*Genesis 21:14*). The story goes on: 'When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept.

'God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt' (*Genesis 21:15-21*). While God has chosen Isaac for a special purpose, God's love of Ishmael is clear, as is Abraham's.

After Sarah's death and burial (*Genesis 23*), Abraham sends his servant off to find a wife for Isaac from his own kin. We are told that 'Isaac had come from Beer-lahai-roi and was settled in the Negev' (*Genesis 24:62*). In *Genesis 16* Beer-lahai-roi is associated with Hagar. Is there a hint here that Sarah's death has opened up an opportunity for reconciliation with Hagar? This suspicion is reinforced by the fact that in the narrative Ishmael and Isaac stand together at their fathers' burial (*Genesis 25:9*). Furthermore, after Abraham's death, Isaac returns to Beer-lahai-roi and settles there (*25:11*).

Just before recording Abraham's death the *Genesis* story states: 'Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. Jokshan was the father of Sheba and Dedan. The sons of Dedan were Asshurim, Letushim,

and Leummim. The sons of Midian were Ephah, Epher, Hanoch, Abida, and Eldaah. All these were the children of Keturah' (*Genesis 25:1-4*). Abraham is presented as the father of many nations. An early Rabbinic suggestion is that Keturah is Hagar, called 'Keturah' because 'her acts were as fragrant as incense [ketoret]' (see *Midrash Tanhuma, Hayyei Sarah, 8; Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer, 29*). It is important to note that the Hebrew text, while asserting God's choice of Isaac for a special mission, speaks with moving affection of Hagar and Abraham's firstborn son, Ishmael, and so of the Arab peoples.

For the most part the stories as we find them in the Hebrew Scriptures are the fruit of hundreds of years of storytelling. They are often quite subtle. In the Qur'an the stories are referred to in order to make a point: either as witnessing to the presence and action of God, or as a warning to submit to the revelation God is now giving through Muhammad.

7. The Muslim Qur'an and the Christian New Testament

The Qur'an frequently refers to the Hebrew Scriptures. Reference to the Christian Scriptures is far less frequent. The Qur'an knows the story of Zechariah and John (*Sûrah 19*). It knows of the virgin Mary. In fact, she is the only woman in the Qur'an called by her name. *Sûrah 19* is named after her. The Qur'an knows of the miraculous conception of Jesus (*Sûrah 3*). However, only in the concluding verses of *Sûrah 5* (*verses 110-116*) does the Qur'an refer to scenes from the public ministry of Jesus: the healing of the man who was born blind, the healing of the leper, the raising of the dead, and the multiplication of the loaves.

The Qur'an shows profound respect for Jesus, whom it sees as following Moses, and preparing the way for Muhammad. *'We sent Jesus, son of Mary, confirming the Torah that had come before him, and We gave him the Gospel, wherein is a guidance and a light, confirming the Torah that had come before him'* (*Sûrah 5:46*). *Sûrah 2* speaks of Jesus receiving the Holy Spirit: *'Indeed We gave unto Moses the Book and caused a succession of messengers to follow after him. And We gave Jesus, son of Mary, clear proofs, and strengthened him with the Holy Spirit'* (*Sûrah 2:87*).

A key difference that separates Christianity from Islam is that Christians see Jesus, not the New Testament, as God's revelation. Christianity is not a 'Religion of the Book'. It is a Religion of a Person, Jesus. Christians believe that Jesus is the perfect human expression of God's Word, God's Self-revelation. Jesus' words and actions, recorded in the Gospels, take us to the his heart, into his prayer-communion with God. His words and his deeds are a precious gift, for they give expression to his person, and to his intimate communion with God whom he addresses as 'Abba' (*'Father'; Mark 14:36*). He encouraged his disciples to address God in the same intimate way (*Matthew 6:9; Galatians 4:6; Romans 8:15*). He experienced himself as God's 'Son'. Jesus felt that God knew him and that he knew God in an especially intimate way (see *Matthew 11:27*). This intimacy bore fruit in an extraordinary capacity to love, and it was his love that gave authority to his ministry of teaching and healing. Jesus wanted to share this intimacy, this love, with everyone.

In John's Gospel we hear Jesus say: 'The Father and I are one' (*John 10:30*). He wanted his disciples to experience this communion: 'May they be one, Father, as we are one' (*John 17:11*). 'May they all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that

the world may believe that you have sent me' (*John 17:21*). It is Jesus himself who is the revelation. The words of his disciples point to him, but they cannot contain him.

The Qur'an claims that Jesus foretold the coming of Muhammad. *'When Jesus, son of Mary, said: O children of Israel! Truly I am the Messenger of God to you, confirming that which came before me in the Torah, and bearing glad tidings of a Messenger to come after me, whose name is 'Ahmad ('more praiseworthy')' (Sûrah 61:6)*. Jesus did see himself as a messenger from God, and as fulfilling the Torah: *'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil' (Matthew 5:17)*. He also spoke of the coming of *'the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name' (John 14:26)*. However, he did not speak of the Spirit as *'Ahmad*, a name which enables Muslims to claim that the New Testament declares that Muhammad is the Spirit promised by Jesus.

The Qur'an's teaching on Jesus' death contradicts the New Testament: *'The Jews say: "We slew the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the messenger of God" though they did not slay him, nor did they crucify him, but it appeared so unto them ... but God raised him up unto Himself' (Sûrah 4:157-158)*. That Jesus was not truly crucified is a strange idea that contradicts the Gospel record. It derives from Docetist sources. This is not the only statement in the Qur'an that is based on legends found in apocryphal gospels. The legend of Jesus making birds from clay (*see Sûrahs 3:49 and 5:110*) is found in the apocryphal Infancy Gospel of Thomas.

The Qur'an misunderstands the Christian idea of the Triune God. It thinks that Christians teach that there are three gods: God, Mary and Jesus. *'When God said, "O Jesus, son of Mary! Didst thou say unto mankind, 'Take me and my mother as gods apart from God'?"' (Sûrah 5:116)*. It is one thing to find reasons why Muhammad misunderstood Christian teaching. It is another to accept the statements of the Qur'an as direct revelations from God, correcting an earlier revelation found in the New Testament. Again and again the Qur'an speaks against Christians calling Jesus *'the Son of God'* (*for example Sûrah 9:30*). Perhaps Muhammad's misunderstanding of Christian belief in regard to Jesus was partly due to lack of clarity in the teaching of the Christians in Arabia. A problem arises if people attribute the misunderstanding to God by accepting the words of the Qur'an, not as Muhammad's response to his experience, but as the very words of God.

Muslims honour Jesus as a prophet chosen by God to follow Moses and to prepare for Muhammad. The Qur'an claims to bring to perfection the religion of Abraham, which God revealed to Moses and to Jesus. *'God sent His Messenger with Guidance and the Religion of Truth to make it prevail over all religion' (Sûrah 61:9; see 9:33; 48:28)*.

The Qur'an is not consistent in its judgment of Christians (*see 2:62; 3:199; 5:66; 5:82; 9:30-31; 29:46*). In the early years in Mecca when Muhammad was trying to win over the Christians, he is sometimes gentle in his judgment of Christians. *'You will find the nearest in affection toward those who believe to be those who say, "We are Christians". That is because among them are priests and monks, and because they are not arrogant' (Sûrah 5:82)*. However, the Qur'an blames Christians for being unfaithful to Jesus and so of failing to live as faithful disciples of Abraham. The Qur'an sees Christians as *'disbelievers' (kafirun)* because they failed to recognise Muhammad as the *'Seal of the prophets' (Sûrah 33:40)*.

'We sent Noah and Abraham and established prophethood and the Book among their progeny. And among them is he who is rightly guided, yet many of them are iniquitous. Then We sent Our messengers to follow in their footsteps, and We sent Jesus, son of Mary, and We gave him the Gospel and placed kindness and mercy in the hearts of those who follow him. And monasticism they invented – We did not ordain it for them – only to seek God's Contentment. Yet they did not observe it with proper observance. So We gave those of them who believed their reward, yet many of them are iniquitous' (Sûrah 57:26-27).

PART TWO: COMPARISONS

1. Monotheism.

The first and most basic 'pillar' of Islam (*Shahâda*) is profession of faith in the One God and in Muhammad as his prophet. The other four pillars of Islam flow from the first: the requirement of ritual prayer (*Salât*); of almsgiving (*Zakât*); of fasting (*Sawm, in Ramadân*); and of making a pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to Mecca once in a lifetime. These all feature in Sûrah 2, and in other sûrahs.

Nothing that we directly experience is self-explanatory. It exists, but it does not have in itself sufficient reason to account for its existence. Some choose to believe that reality simply is the way it is and doesn't need explaining. Others, encouraged by the small successes we have in our search for meaning, choose to believe that reality does ultimately make sense, and that since nothing that we directly experience is self-explanatory, there must exist a Reality that is not dependent on any other reality, but that has within itself a fully satisfying explanation for its existence. It is this Reality that we call 'God'. We choose to believe that it is God who creates and sustains everything in existence. 'In God we live and move and have our being' (*Acts 17:28*). Fully comprehending this Reality is beyond our capacity. We know that if reality is ultimately meaningful, this Reality must exist, but we cannot define it. Any words we use to speak of this Reality can at best point us towards it. It remains mysterious.

People have intuited the presence of this mysterious Reality in nature: in a mountain shrouded in cloud, in a grove of trees, in a spring gushing from the earth, in the sun or moon, in thunder and lightning and in the night sky. There emerged in human consciousness an intuition that ultimately everything is inter-connected, that the spirit of the ocean and the spirit of the earth and the spirit of the sky are ultimately the one Spirit, the one Presence, the one Creator that accounts for the existence of everything and sustains everything in being. The notion of Monotheism was born. It is a central idea to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These are not the only religious movements to have this idea, but they are the ones we are focussing on in this article.

A key conclusion from the above is that when we use words to speak of God we must do so only with an immense sense of wonder, and a profound humility. Jews, Christians, and Muslims agree on this. We must begin with the realisation that no words can comprehensively express a Reality that transcends our necessarily limited experience. We must begin also with the conviction that everyone has a contribution to make here: every thinker, every artist, every lover, every culture. In the context of this article, we focus especially on Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad.

The word that best points us toward the truth about 'God' as revealed by Jesus is the word 'Love'. This is also the teaching of Rumi and al-Arabi. To love is to give one's real self to another, with respect for the other. Where there is love, there we experience the 'Presence', the 'Mystery', the "Sacred"; there we experience 'God'. The universe is an expression of the divine. It is love that radiates the divine. When we love we are in communion with the mysteriously present God, the Ultimate Reality that sustains in existence everything we experience. This is beautifully expressed in Sûrah 2: *'Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God'* (Sûrah 2:115). Sûrah 92:20-21 commends the person who *'seeks the Face of the Lord, the Most High, and surely He will be content.'* These words came to Muhammad after an interval during which he received no words.

We Christians believe that all creation reveals something of the Creator, that 'wherever you turn, there is the Face of God.' For us Jesus is God's most beautiful human revelation, so we look to Jesus, especially, to see the 'Face' of God. Paul writes: 'It is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:6).

God is constantly loving, constantly inspiring, constantly offering forgiveness, so that people will live to the full and help others to live to the full. When terrible things happen, we do not ask why God allowed it, for we take seriously the freedom of our evolving universe, and God's gift to us of our own human freedom, even to act badly. We ask, rather, where is God in what is happening. And our answer is: where there is love, there is God.

We human beings experience, in however limited a way, freedom to choose to do good or evil. God respects this freedom. From our freedom flows much that we experience as evil, but from it flows everything of value. Every created being is a limited, imperfect, but real expression of the Self-giving God. Everything is fundamentally sacred, and so to be respected.

It contradicts reason to think of God as controlling what happens in our universe. On the human level we experience freedom: not absolute freedom, since none of us is a totally independent unit, but a level of freedom to choose in a limited but nevertheless real way. When I think of 'God' I think of a Presence that inspires and respects this freedom. When I look at the universe, the same thinking applies. The evolutionary forces that we experience in the universe are sustained by God, but not controlled by God.

This has radical implications for any and every religion. God loves the universe. God does not control it. When, in God's name, we try to control, or fail to respect the other, we are out of communion with God. Our behaviour is incoherent. The God we speak of is a false God. This understanding of God leads to the conclusion that any religion that is based on the idea of a controlling and determining God, thereby resulting in a religion of control, is radically faulty.

Sûrah 5 speaks of the importance of ritual cleansing and of the pilgrimage to the Ka'bah in Mecca. The Ka'bah, the 'Cube', is the square shaped building containing the large black stone which is revered by pilgrims during the Hajj. The practice pre-dates Islam. This pilgrimage is one of the five pillars of Islam. *'Proclaim the Hajj among mankind. They shall come to thee on foot and on all manners of lean beast, coming from all deep and distant mountain highways'* (Sûrah 22:27).

It is perhaps appropriate to record here the special interest Islam has for Jerusalem. *‘Glory be to Him Who carried his servant by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque, whose precincts we have blessed that we might show him some of our signs. Truly He is the Hearer, the Seer’ (Sûrah 17:1).* Muhammad is recording a dream he had of being taken into heaven. ‘Farthest’ translates *‘al aqsa’*, the name given to a small mosque built in the 7th century, after the death of Muhammad, at the extremity of the Temple Mount on the site of a Christian church. A tradition grew up that Muhammad visited Jerusalem riding a winged horse through the sky. This is the foundation of the claim by Muslims that Jerusalem should be a Muslim capital.

In almost every sûrah, Muhammad speaks of the awesome God, the Creator of everything. In his day the pagan tribes of Arabia were polytheistic. That there is only one God is basic to the teaching of Muhammad, as it is to Judaism and Christianity. Sûrah 42 expresses with particular clarity something found throughout the Qur’an: *‘God has prescribed for you as religion that which He enjoined upon Noah, and that which We [God] revealed unto thee [Muhammad], and that which We enjoined upon Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, that you uphold religion and not become divided therein. Grievous for the idolaters is that which you call them. God chooses for Himself whomsoever He will, and guides unto Himself whosoever turns in repentance’ (Sûrah 42:13).*

‘Say, He, God, is One! God, the Eternally Sufficient unto Himself. He begets not, nor was He begotten. And none is like to Him!’ (Sûrah 122). *‘Thus have We sent thee unto a community, before whom other communities have passed away; that thou mayest recite to them what We have revealed to thee; yet they disbelieve in the Compassionate. Say, He is my Lord; there is no god but He. In Him do I trust and to Him I turn’ (Sûrah 13:30).*

Paul writes: ‘For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist’ (1 Corinthians 8:6). ‘There is one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all’ (Ephesians 4:6).

To be truly monotheistic we cannot say that there is only one God, and then go on to claim that this God is ours alone. If there is only one God, then everything and everybody has the one Source of its being. A true monotheist must see everyone as fundamentally and inherently sacred, however badly people may be behaving. People we consider our enemies are not God’s enemies. Jesus makes this abundantly clear, and it flows from his understanding of God: ‘You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous ... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matthew 5:43-48).

2. The Divinity of Jesus and the Christian teaching of the Trinity.

Christians insist on monotheism. It is important that we express our faith clearly, for the Christian teaching on Jesus as the Son of God and Mary as the mother of God seemed to Muhammad (and continue to seem to many Muslims) to compromise the transcendence of the one God. It is important that we examine carefully the language we Christians use to speak of the relationship between Jesus and God, whom he addressed as ‘Father’.

According to the Christian Scriptures, when those who knew and came to love Jesus heard him speak and witnessed his healing love, they came to see that his words and actions flowed from the special intimacy he had with God. They recognised in Jesus something of their own yearning, something of their own consciousness of the presence to them of God. Jesus' words and actions were the words and actions of Jesus, and they had a special power to reveal God.

When the authors of the Gospels shared this in their writings, they were sharing memories, but also reflections on Jesus and the meaning Jesus gave to their lives. The fact that the community of Jesus' disciples treasured and copied and shared their words points to the Gospels as being inspired, but the words are the words of the Gospel writers and cannot be understood without grasping the meaning their words had some thirty to sixty years after the death of Jesus.

The Gospel of John witnesses to the fact that misunderstanding the nature of the relationship between Jesus and God was already a factor in the debates of the last decade of the first century when the Gospel was composed. It is evident that Jews who did not accept Jesus as the promised Messiah (this group is called 'the Jews' throughout the Gospel) were debating with the Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah. The debate was about how Jesus' followers understood the relationship between Jesus and God.

In John chapter 5 we find an account of Jesus' healing a man. Because the healing took place on the Sabbath we are told: 'The Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the Sabbath' (*John 5:16*). We are then given Jesus' response: 'My Father is still working, and I also am working' (*John 5:17*). The text continues: 'For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, *thereby making himself equal to God*' (*John 5:18*). That this is not how John understood Jesus' claim is clear from Jesus' response: 'Jesus said to them: Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing' (*John 5:19-20*).

It was from his intimate communion with God that Jesus experienced the call and the grace to share with others the revelation that he received from God: 'My teaching is not mine but his who sent me' (*John 7:16-17*). 'I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him' (*John 8:28-29*). 'I declare to the world what I have heard from him' (*John 8:26*). 'I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence' (*John 8:38*). 'The word that you hear is not mine. It is from the Father who sent me' (*John 14:24*).

My aim in quoting from John's Gospel is to state that neither Jesus nor his followers thought of Jesus as *another* God. On the contrary, Jesus acknowledged that everything he is comes from God, including the words and deeds that flowed from his communion with the One who alone is God.

'Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work' (*John 4:34*). 'I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me' (*John 5:30*). 'The deeds that the

Father has given me to complete, the very deeds that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me' (*John 5:36*). 'I do nothing on my own. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him' (*John 8:28-29*). 'It is the Father living in me who is doing this work' (*John 14:10*). 'Jesus cried aloud: "Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me" (*John 12:44-45*).

Jesus' disciples came to see him as the perfect human expression (the 'incarnation') of God. The Gospel of John expresses this well in the Prologue. After stating that the whole of creation is an expression of God's Self-giving Word, John tells us that God's eternal Word found perfect human expression in Jesus: 'The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace ... No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made God known' (*John 1:14-18*).

When we speak of Jesus' divinity, we are speaking of his intimate communion with God. Everything he is, everything he says, everything he does, flows from this communion. Such was the intimacy of this communion that Jesus could say: 'The Father and I are one' (*John 10:30*). Here again 'the Jews' misunderstood his claim. John writes: 'The Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus replied, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?" The Jews answered, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are *making yourself God*" (*John 10:31-33*).

Jesus was never 'making himself God'. His claim is to be 'God's Son' (*John 10:36*). He enjoyed such intimate communion with God that he could say: 'The Father is in me and I am in the Father' (*John 10:38*; see also *John 14:11*). The Spirit of God filled his heart, his prayer, his life, and he revealed God in the love that flowed from this communion, a love, as noted earlier, that gave authority to his words, and healing and liberating power to his relationships.

Jesus' disciples were astonished at Jesus' intimacy with God, and at the extraordinary love that poured out from Jesus' heart and brought healing to so many. They knew that this healing came from God through 'Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders and signs that God did through him' (*Acts 2:22*). Paul writes: 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' (*2 Corinthians 5:19*). 'God our Saviour poured out on us the Holy Spirit through Jesus the Messiah, our Saviour' (*Titus 3:6*).

It was their experiences of the crucified Jesus as raised by God to life and mysteriously present among them that alerted them to a more profound dimension of Jesus' communion with God. They came to see that in raising Jesus to life, 'God has made this crucified Jesus both Lord (Κύριος) and Messiah' (*Acts 2:36*). The Greek Κύριος translates the Hebrew 'Adonay, which was the word sounded when YHWH was found in the Hebrew text. It is the 'Name' (HaShem) revealed by God to Moses in the scene of the burning bush when God commissioned Moses to go to Egypt and be God's instrument in liberating the Hebrew slaves (see *Exodus 3:15*).

The New Testament speaks of 'God' nearly twelve hundred times. The reference is to the One whom Jesus addressed as 'God' and 'Father'. However, it was not long before the Christian community embraced the practice of including Jesus when they spoke of 'God'. We find this

in a letter written in the opening years of the second century to the community in Ephesus by Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch: 'Our God, even Jesus the Christ, was borne in the womb by Mary according to the dispensation of God, of the seed of David and of the Holy Ghost' (*Ephesians 18*). In a letter to the community in Rome he writes: 'Suffer me to copy the passion of my God' (*Romans, 6*).

It is possible that an example of this practice is found in the Prologue to John's Gospel, composed in the last decade of the first century. Some early manuscripts read: 'No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made God known' (*John 1:18*). Other manuscripts include the word 'God' and instead of 'It is the only Son' read: 'It is God the only Son'.

When we believe that in seeing Jesus we are seeing God, we are not believing that we are seeing another God, but the One God. When we say that Mary is the 'Mother of God' we are speaking in the light of what I have just described. We are not saying that the One God had a human mother. We are saying that her human son, Jesus, is the manifestation of God in human form. The focus is on Jesus, and on Jesus who points to the one God, whom he called 'Father' because everything he is and everything he has and everything he does came from God, to whose divine will he always submitted.

The early Christian practice of calling Jesus 'God' witnesses to the fact that they were not content to admire the human Jesus, while failing to see him as the revelation of God: failing to listen to or watch God being revealed in and through him. The essence of Christianity is that in listening to Jesus and watching him, and in experiencing something of the intimacy of his prayer-communion, we are truly being drawn into communion with God. When we Christians say that Jesus is 'God', or say that Mary is 'the mother of God', this is a shorthand way of drawing attention to the truths I have tried to open up in that last few paragraphs. Jesus is not *another* God. He is fully human, but in such an extraordinary purity that it is God, the one God in whom Jesus and Christians believe, who is revealed in and through him.

Christians speak of Jesus as having two natures. The word 'nature' is a scientific term born of observation. We come to know something's 'nature' by observing what it does. When his disciples watched Jesus and listened to him his humanity was obvious. He showed them what we human beings can be at our best. But they saw more than this: they came to see that what Jesus was saying and doing was revealing God as God is revealed in a human being. That is Jesus' divine nature. He invites everyone to share this nature with him. He wants us to share the intimate communion that he has with God, so that we, too, will speak God's words and be instruments to each other of God's life-giving love.

The authors of the New Testament were not philosophers, and they show no interest in attempting to explore the inner, necessarily mysterious, nature of God's Being. They speak of 'God'. They speak of God's 'Word': God's will to give expression to God's Self in sharing God's Being through creation. It is this divine Word that finds perfect human expression in the man Jesus (*John 1:14*). They speak of God's 'Spirit', when referring to the ways in which God's power and God's action are revealed in the world. John declares that in Jesus God 'gives the Spirit without reserve' (*John 3:34*).

The 'Trinity' of God, Jesus and the Spirit alerts us to the truth that we can understand creation only when we acknowledge the relationship of every creature to God who holds everything in existence and God's Holy Spirit that energises everything and draws everything to find itself in participating in the Being of God. It does more: it opens the way to see God differently. While never wavering from monotheism, and while knowing that we humans cannot comprehend God, we came to think of God as Communion of Love.

Transcending creation, God is Love-Communion, and it is this Communion that is expressed in, and is experienced by, the cosmos, our amazing home, and everything that makes up our universe. Christian faith opens us to welcome God's gift of God's Self in love, in the threefold giving that is the gift of the Holy Spirit (*Romans 5:5*), the gift of the Divine Word made flesh and dwelling amongst us (*John 1:14*), the gift of union with the Origin of all, who is Originating Love (*1 John 4:8,16*).

The writers of the New Testament were fully aware that no words can comprehend God's Being. But their awareness of the special communion between Jesus and God finds expression in the Trinitarian Father, Son and Spirit. 'Father' picks up Jesus' intimacy in speaking of God. 'Son' speaks of Jesus in this intimate communion. 'Spirit' speaks of the love that flowed between God and Jesus. It is this 'Trinity' that Matthew has in mind in the conclusion of his Gospel, when the Risen and Exalted Jesus commissions his disciples: 'Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (*Matthew 28:19*). It is expressed also in the traditional prayers: 'Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit' and 'In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit'.

The words 'Father', 'Son' and 'Spirit' are perhaps best kept for the 'Trinity' we discussed in the previous paragraph. If we are speaking of the inner nature of God words like 'Self-bestowing Source', 'Word' and 'Love-communion' seem more appropriate. God is the Self-bestowing Source of everything that exists. God is the Word that is the perfect expression of this Source. God is the Love-communion of the divine Source and the divine Word.

None of this claims to define God, but, thanks to Jesus, we know that God is Love-Communion, and that everything that exists does so because of God's Self-gift. As John says: 'God's Word is towards God' (*John 1:1*). God's 'Let it be' (*Genesis 1:3*) flows from this divine communion, so that every created being participates in this love, this divine 'Spirit', and is drawn into this divine love-communion.

Christian monotheism is beautifully enriched by Christian teaching of the Trinity: a 'Trinity' understood firstly as God, Jesus and the Spirit of Love that flowed between them; a 'Trinity' understood secondly as daring to speak of God as the Origin of all, as the divine Word, and as the divine Spirit.

The Qur'an misunderstands the Christian belief in the Trinity. It thinks that Christians worship Jesus and Mary as two gods beside God. *'O People of the Book! Do not exaggerate in your religion, nor utter anything concerning God save the truth. Verily the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of God, and his Word, which he committed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers, and say not "Three" (Sûrah 4:171). 'When God*

said, "O Jesus son of Mary! Didst thou say unto mankind, 'Take me and my mother as gods apart from God'? (Sûrah 5:116).

The Qur'an frequently insists that God does not have a son or a consort (*Sûrahs 2:116, 6:101, 10:68, 17:111, 18:4, 19:88, 21:26, 72.3 and 112*). This language is appropriate as a criticism of the pagan tribes of Arabia, but reveals a misunderstanding of Christian belief.

Jesus' disciples began by getting to know Jesus. He was clearly a human being, but there was something quite special about him: his healing love. Gradually they came to see that this amazing love came from his special communion with God, whom he addressed as 'Abba' ('Father'). Knowing God as 'Father', Jesus knew himself as God's 'Son'. Christians believe that there is only one God, the God whom Jesus addressed as 'Father', and this God is revealed in Jesus, his 'Son', and most intimately in Jesus' prayer, in the communion of love he enjoyed with his 'Father', the communion of love we speak of as the 'Holy Spirit'.

Jesus' followers were amazed at the purity and beauty of Jesus' love. Because of Jesus' teaching and actions, they came to see that God, the one God who is the source of all and who holds everything and everyone in existence, is Self-bestowing Love and that the human Jesus was totally caught up in this divine love. It was God who healed through Jesus. It was God who loved through Jesus. It was God who forgave through Jesus. Jesus and the God he called 'Father' were one in an intimate communion. It is their mutual love that is spoken of as 'The Holy Spirit'. It was God's will that Jesus share this Spirit of love with his disciples, and ultimately with every person on earth.

Paul ends his Second Letter to the Christian community in Corinth with the prayer: 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you' (*2 Corinthians 13:13-14*). It was largely their experience of sharing in this love that explains the growth of Christian communities and that attracted people to find in the Christian community a way of life that satisfied their search for meaning. As Paul wrote in his Letter to the Christian community in Rome: 'Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (*Romans 5:5*). And to the community in Philippi he wrote: 'If there is any appeal in Christ, any consolation from love, any communion in the Spirit, any movements of compassion and feelings of love, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one soul and one mind' (*Philippians 2:1-2*).

We cannot see the Transcendent God, but we believe that in watching the human Jesus we are watching how God wishes to reveal God's Self in human form. Jesus says: 'Whoever sees me has seen the Father' (*John 14:9*). When we speak of God's 'Word', we are speaking of God achieving God's will through creating, forgiving, and embracing in love. We Christians see Jesus as expressing this in a fully beautiful human way.

Christianity preserves the Transcendence of the One God. We also believe that this One God is constantly active in history, and Jesus helps us to see and feel what this loving presence and action is like. He enables us to find human words to direct us to better ways of thinking of God. He is a constant corrective to our tendency to misunderstand God by imposing on God our limited concepts and customary habits of thinking.

God is a communion in love. It follows that the whole of creation exists because it is a finite participation in the very being of God. Everything is an expression (a limited, imperfect, but real expression) of God. Everything belongs because everything is held in existence by, and gives expression to, the One God.

Never is our teaching concerning God intended to compromise Jesus' belief and our belief in the truth we share with our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters, that there is one God. Seeing Jesus as the Word of God in human form reminds us to listen to all the ways God speaks to us. Watching Jesus inspired by God reminds us to wonder at the way God breathes in each of us, embracing us in love and drawing us into full listening (full obedience, full submission) to God who is breathing in us and drawing us all into love-communion. The God revealed by Jesus is a God of all-embracing, all-encompassing, Love.

3. God is compassionate and merciful.

Throughout the Qur'an God is acknowledged to be compassionate and merciful. This is highlighted in the opening section (Sûrah 1) which reads: *'In the name of God (the Basmalah), the Compassionate [Ar-Rahmân], the Merciful [Ar-Rahîm]. Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds, the Compassionate, the Merciful, Master of the Day of Judgment. Thee we worship, and from Thee we seek help. Guide us upon the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not of those who incur wrath, nor of those who are astray.'*

Jesus taught us that God's love is unconditional, and he showed this in the way he related to people. God loves believers and disbelievers. Of course, love does not impose. We can reject God's love. It matters how we choose, but Christians believe that nothing we do can stop God loving. Our behaviour can prevent us from receiving the love that is unconditionally offered. To welcome God's offer of love we are invited to follow Jesus, as this sûrah invites Muslim believers to follow Muhammad. Jesus does more than invite us to follow him. He asks us to let him live in us, and he gives us a share in his Spirit, his prayer, his faith, his hope, his love, his communion with God.

God's compassion and mercy are key attributes of God as portrayed in the Christian Scriptures. The birth of Jesus is introduced with the words: 'By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us' (Luke 1:78). James writes: 'The Lord is compassionate and merciful' (James 5:11). Paul prays: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation' (2 Corinthians 1:3). 'When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, because of his mercy' (Titus 3:4-5). God is 'rich in mercy' (Ephesians 2:4). A central tenet of the Christian faith is that God's mercy is 'for all' (Romans 11:32).

We know that God is compassionate and merciful because we see Jesus being compassionate and merciful. 'A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you want to, you can make me clean." Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "Of course I want to. Be made clean!" (Mark 1:40-41). 'Jesus saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things' (Mark 6:34). 'When there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, "I have compassion for the

crowd' (Mark 8:1). 'As Jesus approached the gate of the town Naim, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow. When the Lord saw the widow, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" (Luke 7:12-14).

Jesus' image of God is expressed beautifully in his story about a father's love for his wayward son. Desperate, the boy decides to return home. Jesus says: 'While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him' (Luke 15:20).

Jesus calls his followers: 'Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate' (Luke 6:36). 'Blessed are they who show mercy' (Matthew 5:7). Jesus tells a story of a man who is attacked by brigands and left half-dead by the side of the road. Three people pass along the road. The first two ignore him. Then 'a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him' (Luke 10:33-34).

We believe that Jesus gives us a share in his compassion, the compassion of God. Paul writes: 'God is my witness how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus' (Philippians 1:8). 'If there is any appeal in Christ, any consolation from love, any communion in the Spirit, any movements of compassion and feelings of love, make my joy complete; be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one soul and one mind' (Philippians 2:1-2). 'As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion' (Colossians 3:12).

The Qur'an assures us that God is compassionate. In the New Testament we see what this means by watching God's compassion stirring the heart of Jesus. Sûrah 1 calls us to praise and worship the God of compassion. Jesus addresses God in prayer as 'Father, Lord of heaven and earth' (Luke 10:21). We Christians are called to 'worship the Lord your God and serve only him' (Luke 4:8). Sûrah 1 prays for God's guidance. For Christians it is Jesus who shares with us his intimate communion with God, and who walks with us, for he is himself 'the Way, the Truth and the Life' (John 14:6). Sûrah 2 encourages prayer to God: '*Seek help in patience and prayer, and this indeed is difficult, except for the humble, who reckon that they shall meet their Lord, and that they shall return unto Him*' (Sûrah 2:45-46).

Christians are at home with this beautiful and wise advice. Jesus assures us: 'Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive' (Matthew 21:22). Paul writes: 'I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone ... so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Timothy 2:1-4). 'Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God' (Philippians 4:6).

4. Trust.

Sûrah 9:129 reads: *'God suffices me. There is no God but He. In Him do I trust.'* The expression *'In God let the believers trust'* is found throughout the *Qur'an* (see Sûrahs 3:122, 160; 5:11; 9:51; 12:67; 14:11-12; 39:38; 58:10; 64:13).

Christians would joyfully share these words of trust with our Muslim brothers and sisters. At the Last Supper, before his passion and death, Jesus pleaded with his disciples: *'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me'* (*John 14:1*). Paul writes: *'I know the one in whom I have put my trust'* (*2 Timothy 1:12*). Peter writes: *'Through Christ you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God'* (*1 Peter 1:21*).

5. Prayer. *'Seek help in patience and prayer, and this indeed is difficult, except for the humble, who reckon that they shall meet their Lord, and that they shall return unto Him'* (Sûrah 2:45-46).

'Call upon your Lord humbly and in secret' (Sûrah 7:55).

Jesus' call is similar: *'Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you'* (*Matthew 6:5-6*).

'Perform the prayer at the declining of the sun until the darkening of the night. And the recitation at dawn – truly the recitation at dawn is ever witnessed' (Sûrah 17:78). One of the strengths of Islam is its simplicity and its communal nature. The *Qur'an* calls Muslims as in this text, to pray at certain times. Ritual prayer (Salât) is one of the five pillars of Islam. *'O you who believe! When you are called to the congregational prayer, hasten to the remembrance of God and leave off trade. That is better for you, if you but knew. And when prayer is completed, disperse throughout the land and seek the Bounty of God, and remember God much, that haply you may prosper'* (Sûrah 62:9-10).

Jesus encouraged his disciples *'to pray always and not to lose heart'* (*Luke 18:1*).

6. Submission.

Obedience is key to Islam and Christianity. *'Truly, the religion in the sight of God is submission'* (Sûrah 3:19). The word 'Islam' comes from *islama*, meaning 'submission'. Submission to God is central to Islam. *'We believe in God and what has been sent down upon us, and in what was sent down upon Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and in what Moses, Jesus and the prophets were given from their Lord. We make no distinction among any of them, and unto Him we submit'* (Sûrah 3:84). For Christians, too, obedience to God is central. Jesus reveals the importance of wanting only what God wants.

7. Repentance and Forgiveness.

Christians are at one with the Qur'an when it states: *'God guides to Himself whoever turns in repentance'* (Sûrah 13:17), and *'God does not wrong human beings in the least, but rather human beings wrong themselves'* (Sûrah 10:44). *'Whoever does evil or wrongs himself, and then seeks forgiveness of God, he will find God Forgiving, Merciful'* (Sûrah 4:110).

'It is the same for them whether thou askest forgiveness for them or thou askest forgiveness for them not; God will never forgive them. Truly God does not guide iniquitous people' (Sûrah 63:6).

The Qur'an teaches that the only way for people to avoid wronging themselves and suffering the consequences is to surrender to God's will by accepting the revelation given through Abraham, through Moses, through Jesus, and, finally, through Muhammad. *'Those who believe and perform righteous deeds and believe what has been sent down unto Muhammad – and it is the truth from their Lord – He has absolved them from their evil deeds and set their state aright'* (Sûrah 47:2).

Sûrah 6 focuses on the Oneness of God and on what will happen to those who believe and to those who do not. It makes the claim that pagan Arabs, as well as Jewish and Christian Arabs, will find forgiveness from the Merciful God only if they submit to God as revealed in the Qur'an. People who persist in rejecting God and God's revelation will suffer the consequences. *'Whomsoever God will, He leads astray, and whomsoever He will, He places him upon a straight path'* (Sûrah 6:39). The Qur'an assumes that whatever happens is ultimately the work of God.

Thanks to Jesus Christians have learned that God loves all that God has made. God does not control creation, but respects the freedom given to the universe, and especially to us human beings. It is not God who *leads astray*. It is our own sinful refusal to welcome God's love.

The Qur'an describes the punishment in store for those who believe and then abandon their belief. It makes an exception for *'those who repent and make amends, for truly God is Forgiving, Merciful'* (Sûrah 3:89). *'If you are righteous, then truly He is Forgiving toward the penitent'* (Sûrah 17:25). *'Say: "If you love God, follow me, and God will love you and forgive you your sins. And God is Forgiving, Merciful". Say: "Obey God and obey the Messenger." If they turn away, truly God loves not the disbelievers'* (Sûrah 3:31-32 *'If thou sleekest forgiveness for them seventy times, God will not forgive them. That is because they disbelieve in God and His Messenger, and God guides not iniquitous people'* (Sûrah 9:80).

For Christians justification is not something we achieve by the choices we make. We are, in Paul's words: *'justified by faith'* (Romans 3:28), *'justified by God's grace as a gift'* (Romans 3:24). Faith is not something we do. It is something we receive. It is Jesus' own faith in God that Jesus offers to us. It is for us to welcome Jesus' faith as a gift. It enables us to share in Jesus' communion with God. To be forgiven we must open our hearts to welcome God's offer of grace, but from God's side, God is love and is always ready to forgive. There are no limits to God's offer of forgiveness and guidance. God continues to love and guide *'iniquitous people.'* Jesus tells a story about a rich man who showed no care for a poor man lying at his gate (Luke 16:19-31). The poor man dies and is in heaven. The rich man dies and is in hell. It is too late for

forgiveness, not because God has stopped loving, but because love does not force itself upon anyone, and the rich man has locked himself into a place where God's love cannot reach.

God's readiness to forgive is central to the teaching of Jesus, as it was central to his ministry. Jesus encouraged a paralysed man: 'Take heart, your sins are forgiven' (*Matthew 9:3*). He instructed his disciples: 'Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses' (*Mark 11:25*). Jesus shared his Spirit with his disciples so that they, too, could be instruments of God's forgiveness: 'Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven' (*John 20:22*).

Paul picked up Jesus' teaching about God's forgiveness when he pleaded with the Christian community in Corinth to forgive a member who had behaved badly. He wanted God's gracious forgiveness to flow through them: 'You should forgive and console him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him' (*2 Corinthians 2:7-8*). Christians do not limit God's forgiveness to '*the righteous*'. This is central to Paul's experience. As he wrote to the Christian community in Rome: 'God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us' (*Romans 5:8*).

The New Testament stresses the possibility and the importance of repentance. Mark sums up Jesus' proclamation with the words: 'The time is fulfilled. The reign of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news' (*Mark 1:15*). We repent when we see things differently and have the courage to live differently because of what we see (*see Acts 26:20*). Jesus is calling his contemporaries to open their minds and hearts to welcome the good news that God is, indeed, forgiving and merciful, and wants to embrace sinners in love so that they can truly 'live and live to the full' (*John 10:10*).

In scene after scene in the Gospels we watch Jesus demonstrating God's mercy and readiness to forgive sinners. The parable of the Prodigal Son is one of his best-known stories (*Luke 15:11-32*). From the cross we hear him praying to his Father: 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing' (*Luke 23:34*).

Paul prays: 'Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin' (*Romans 4:7-8*). 'Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you' (*Ephesians 4:30-32*).

As God forgives us, we are called to forgive one another. On one occasion Peter asked Jesus should he forgive as much as seven times. Jesus replied: 'not seven times, but seventy times seven times' (*Matthew 18:21*). 'Whenever you stand praying, forgive if you have anything against anyone' (*Mark 11:25*). We are to forgive 'from the heart' (*Matthew 18:35*).

8. Obeying a non-Muslim government

The Qur'an teaches: '*Let not the believers take the disbelievers as protectors (Arabic awliya')*' (Sûrah 3:28). *The Study Quran* states: 'Awliya' is a multifaceted word that can mean 'protector', 'ruler' 'ally', 'client' or 'friend' depending on the context' (*page 138 col. 2*). '*Do not take*

disbelievers as protectors (awliya') till they migrate in the way of God. But if they turn their backs, then seize them and slay them wherever you find them' (Sûrah 4:89). 'O you who believe! Take not the Jews and Christians as protectors (awliya'). They are the protectors of one another. And whosoever takes them as protectors, surely he is of them ... Your protector is only God and His Messenger, and those who believe, who perform the prayer and give alms while bowing down' (Sûrah 5:51, 55).

While many Muslims living in a democracy do not interpret the sûrahs as forbidding them to live under a non-Muslim law, the problem is that Muslim teachers, if they so choose, can interpret and teach the sûrahs in this way. Such an interpretation obviously poses problems in a democratic society.

9. Texts that speak of the relations between men and women.

One of the reasons for Muhammad's success in achieving power was to replace the relationships that bound people to their family and tribe with the bond of being Muslim. For Christians, too, there is a strong bond among those who share faith in Jesus and in God as revealed by him.

Luke quotes a saying of Jesus that sounds shocking if we fail to understand the Aramaic idiom he is using: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14:26). When 'hate' and 'love' are contrasted in Aramaic they do not refer to feelings of antipathy or attraction. They speak of choice, of preference.

The decision to believe in Jesus as God's Self-revelation is a radical one. We must, as Jesus says elsewhere: 'Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well' (Matthew 6:33). We are to 'love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might' (Deuteronomy 6:5; repeated by Jesus in Matthew 22:37). We are to love 'father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and ourselves'. We are to love them with the sacred love that binds us to them *in God*.

The Qur'an teaches: 'The believing men and believing women are friends of one another' (Sûrah 9:71). Sûrah 2:222-243 looks at some aspects of the relationship between husbands and wives. It includes the statement: "Men have a degree over women" (2:228). This view was prevalent in seventh century tribal Arabia, as in other places then and since. But are we to believe that this is God's specific instruction? Along the same line, the Qur'an's instructions in Sûrah 4 concerning heritage favour the male: 'unto the male a share equal to that of two females' (Sûrah 4:11). In Sûrah 4:34 we read: 'Men are the upholders and maintainers of women, by virtue of that in which God has favoured some of them above others.' It gets stronger: 'As for those women from whom you fear discord and animosity, admonish them, then leave them in their beds, then strike them'. 'God enjoins upon you concerning your children: to the male a share equal to that of two females' (Sûrah 4:11). 'Men are the upholders and maintainers of women by virtue of that in which God has favoured some of them above others and by virtue of their spending from their wealth. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [their husband's] absence what God has guarded. As for those from whom you

fear discord and animosity, admonish them, then leave them in their beds, then strike them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Truly God is Exalted, Great' (Sûrah 4:34).

These are examples of the inequality between male and female in the Qur'an. It is one thing to see this in light of Arabian Bedouin customs in the seventh century. It is another to take these statements as expressions of God's will.

Polygamy was practised among the pagan Arabian tribes. Many of Muhammad's followers were killed in the battle against his own tribe. In the battle of Uhud, Muhammad himself was injured. Muhammad is concerned for the children who have lost their fathers, and suggests that the Muslim men take a number of wives, and in this way provide the wives and the children with protection: *'If you fear that you will not deal fairly with the orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you, two, three or four'* (Sûrah 4:3).

Christians have always favoured monogamy, for we see the love of husband and wife as a symbol of God's faithful love to each of us personally.

Sûrah 33 concerns Muhammad's wives: *'O Prophet! We have made lawful for thee thy wives to whom thou hast given their bridewealth, as well as those whom thy right hand possesses of those whom God has granted thee as spoils of war [two of Muhammad's wives fit into this group: Safiyyah bint Huyayy and Juwaayriyah bint Harithah], and the daughters of thy paternal uncles and the daughters of thy paternal aunts, and the daughters of thy maternal uncles and the daughters of thy maternal aunts who emigrated with thee, and any believing woman if she gives herself in marriage to the Prophet and if the Prophet desires to marry her – for thee alone, not for the rest of the believers. We know well what We have enjoined upon them with respect to their wives and those whom their right hands possess, that there may be no blame upon thee. And God is Forgiving, Merciful'* (Sûrah 33:50).

Muhammad is given permission to have as many wives as he wants. Are we to take this as a literal instruction from God, or does it convey Muhammad's understanding of what God permitted him? It is difficult not to have the same doubts about the following: *'O Prophet! Why dost thou forbid that which God has made lawful unto thee, seeking the good pleasure of thy wives? And God is Forgiving, Merciful. God has already ordained for you the absolution of your oaths, and God is your Master. He is the Knower, the Wise'* (Sûrah 66:1-2).

The Study Quran writes: 'This verse was reportedly revealed after the Prophet had sworn to his wife Hafsar that he would no longer have intimate relations with his Coptic slave girl, Mariyah. The Prophet had been intimate with Mariyah in Hafsar's apartment on Hafsar's day (the Prophet's wives rotated, each having a day with him in turn). When Hafsar became upset, the Prophet asked her to tell no one of it, and promised on oath that he would not again be intimate with Mariyah. He then told Mariyah that she was forbidden to him, after which this verse and the following verses were revealed' (page 1389 column 1). God assures Muhammad that he does not have to keep the oath he swore to his wife, since God has declared that it is lawful for him to be intimate with Mariyah! Is this God speaking?

In its descriptions of Paradise the Qur'an always speaks from the male point of view. The joys of heaven include *'maidens of modest gaze, of like age'* (Sûrah 38:52) We find similar statements

elsewhere in the Qur'an: *'Truly, the reverent are in a station secure amid gardens and springs, wearing fine silk and rich brocade, facing one another. Thus it is. And we shall wed them to wide-eyed [others translate 'black-eyed'] maidens' (Sûrah 44:52-54). 'Truly, the reverent shall be in gardens of bliss, rejoicing in what their Lord has given them. And their Lord has shielded them from the punishment of Hellfire: "Eat and drink in enjoyment for that which you used to do," reclining upon couches arrayed, and we shall wed them to wide-eyed maidens' (Sûrah 52:18-20). 'They recline upon beds lined with rich brocade, the fruits of the two Gardens near at hand ... Therein are maidens of modest gaze, whom neither man nor jinn has ever touched ' (Sûrah 55:54-56) [In Arabic mythology, a jinn is a spirit inhabiting the earth but unseen by humans, capable of assuming various forms and exercising extraordinary powers]. 'good and beautiful ones' (Sûrah 55:70), 'maidens secluded in pavilions' (55:72), 'untouched as yet by man or jinn' (Sûrah 55:74). 'They recline upon green cushions and beautiful wonders' (Sûrah 55:76). 'There shall be wide-eyed maidens' (Sûrah 56:22). 'Truly, the reverent shall have a place of triumph, gardens and vineyards, buxom maidens of like age' (Sûrah 78:33).*

It is one thing to read these statements from within the patriarchal culture of seventh century Arabia. It is another to read them as divine revelation. Tragically, seeing women as subordinate to men is found in almost all cultures. In spite of the teaching and example of Jesus, Christians, like other religious communities, have been slow to recognise the complementary equality between men and women.

Paul grasped Jesus' teaching well when he wrote in what is perhaps his earliest extant letter: *'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28).* However, Paul was a man of his time and when he speaks, for example, of marriage, he speaks of marriage as it was experienced in the culture of his day. Paul writes: *'Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord' (Ephesians 5:22).* It is important to note that he is not telling wives to be subject to their husbands – he, along with his readers, is taking that for granted. What he is doing is introducing an element that radically shifts the focus of the relationship between a wife and her husband: she is to be subject to him *'as you are to the Lord.'* As he wrote in the verse just before the one I have quoted: *'Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ' (Ephesians 5:21) – man to woman and woman to man.* When relationships of any kind are lived *'in Christ'* everything changes. Sadly, even in cultures influenced by Christianity, the relationships between men and women have been slow to change. It appears that even love finds it hard to change cultural habits.

'Tell the believing women to lower their eyes and to guard their private parts, and to not display their adornment except that which is visible thereof, and let them draw their kerchiefs over their breasts, and not display their adornment except to their husbands. [The text goes on to list the males who are part of her family or the family of her husband]. Nor let them stamp their feet [dance] in such a way that the adornment they conceal becomes known' (Sûrah 24:31). 'O Prophet! Tell your wives and daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks over themselves' (Sûrah 33:59). Like Sûrah 24:31 and 60, this concerns modesty. According to *The Study Quran*, the exact amount to be covered *'has been debated' (page 1038 column 1).* *'Tell them to draw their cloaks over themselves' (Sûrah 33:59).*

Sûrah 33 speaks of Muhammad's wives who are to *'obey God and His Messenger'* (verses 30-34). It speaks of Muhammad's marriage to his cousin Zeynah. Muhammad had arranged for Zeynah to marry Zeyd his adopted son. When the marriage ended in divorce, he took her as his wife (verse 37). *'When you divorce your wives, divorce them for the waiting period [three months], and count well the waiting period, and reverence your Lord. Expel women not from their houses; nor shall they depart, unless they commit a flagrant indecency. These are the limits set by God ... When they have fulfilled their term, take them back in an honourable way or separate from them in an honourable way. And call two just persons among yourselves to witness and uphold the testimony for God'* (Sûrah 65:1-2). Mary is presented as an example to Muhammad's wives: *'Mary, the daughter of 'Imrân, preserved her chastity [Sûrah 21:91]. Then We breathed therein of Our Spirit, and she confirmed the Words of her Lord and His Book and was among the devoutly obedient'* (Sûrah 66:12).

In the Arab Bedouin culture, as in many cultures, only the male had the power to divorce. Jesus spoke out against this practice in Judaism of his day (see Mark 10:2-11). Paul deals with the issue of divorce in his First Letter to the Christian community in Corinth (7:10-16). He acknowledges that there is a place for divorce in certain circumstances. He stresses the importance of peace between husband and wife, and the importance of being free to follow one's faith. This is not the place to analyse the important nuances of Paul's teaching. His Letter needs careful reading.

10. Heaven and Hell

'In the Hereafter there shall be severe punishment, forgiveness from God and contentment, and the life of this world is naught but the enjoyment of delusion' (Sûrah 57:20).

The Study Quran quotes Ibn 'Ajibah: "The world is something that appears beautiful on the outside, but that conceals what is ugly within it, like one who tricks people, and then cheats them. The world appears to those who pursue it as sweetness and infatuation, overtaking them little by little, until they become totally entangled in it and neglect all preparation for the Hereafter. Life passes from their hand in vanity, and the world continues to delude and betray them until it brings them bankrupt to the moment of their death' (page 1337, col. 2).

At times in the Christian Scriptures the world has negative connotations. Jesus says: 'The world hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil' (John 7:7). John is speaking of the world as being closed to God. However, fundamentally the New Testament view of the world is positive. 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him' (John 3:16-17).

'Truly those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians ... whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord. No fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve' (Sûrah 2:62).

Heaven is seen as God's reward for those who follow the teachings revealed in the Qur'an: *'As for those who believe and perform righteous deeds – We task no one beyond their capacity*

– it is they who are the inhabitants of the Garden; they shall abide therein. And We will remove whatever rancour lies within their breasts. Rivers shall run below them. And they will say, “Praise be to God, Who guided us into this. We would not have been rightly guided, had not God guided us. The messengers of our Lord certainly brought the truth” (Sûrah 7:42-43). The Qur’an holds out to believers the promise of Paradise, imagined as ‘gardens of bliss in the presence of their Lord’ (Sûrah 68:34).

In its descriptions of paradise the Qur’an always speaks from the male point of view. The joys of heaven include ‘maidens of modest gaze, of like age’ (Sûrah 38:52). ‘Truly, the reverend are in a station secure amid gardens and springs, wearing fine silk and rich brocade, facing one another. We shall wed them to wide-eyed maidens’ (Sûrah 44:52-54). ‘Truly, the reverent shall be in gardens of bliss, rejoicing in what their Lord has given them ... Eat and drink in enjoyment ... reclining upon couches arrayed, and We shall wed them to wide-eyed maidens’ (Sûrah 52:18-20). ‘They recline upon beds lined with rich brocade, the fruits of the two Gardens near at hand ... Therein are maidens of modest gaze, whom neither man nor jinn has ever touched’ (Sûrah 55:54-56), ‘good and beautiful ones’ (55:70), ‘maidens secluded in pavilions’ (55:72), ‘untouched as yet by man or jinn’ (Sûrah 55:74). ‘They recline upon green cushions and beautiful wonders’ (Sûrah 55:76). ‘There shall be wide-eyed maidens’ (Sûrah 56:22). ‘Truly, the reverent shall have a place of triumph, gardens and vineyards, buxom maidens of like age’ (Sûrah 78:33). It is one thing to read these statements from within the patriarchal culture of seventh century Arabia. It is another to read these texts as coming directly from God.

The Christian belief in heaven is expressed in the prayer of Commendation in the Funeral Rite: ‘Go forth Christian soul from this world in the name of God the Almighty Father who created you, in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God who suffered for you, in the name of the Holy Spirit who was poured out upon you. Go forth faithful Christian! May you live in peace this day, may your home be with God, with Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus, with Joseph and all the angels and saints ... May you return to your Creator who formed you from the dust of the earth. May holy Mary, the angels, and all the saints come to meet you as you go forth from this life ... May you see your Redeemer face to face.’

Heaven is being in communion with God, a communion that nothing can interrupt. Saint Augustine wrote: ‘You have made us for yourself, O God. And our hearts are restless till they rest in You’. Heaven is this resting in the communion of love given and love received, a communion that fills our being and totally satisfies our hearts. It is an infinite growing in love as we penetrate into the infinitude that is God, a communion that embraces everything that God loves. Paul writes: ‘Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the human mind to imagine what God has prepared for those who love him’ (1 Corinthians 2:9).

“Hell” plays a huge role in the Qur’an. ‘Hell’ or its equivalent (‘Flame’, ‘Fire’) is explicitly mentioned in 83 of the 114 sûrahs. This leaves 31 sûrahs that do not mention ‘hell’ explicitly, but in nearly half of these we find expressions such as: ‘an overwhelming punishment from God’ (Sûrah 12:107); ‘the punishment of a tremendous day’ (Sûrah 26:135); ‘arraigned unto the punishment’ (Sûrah 30:16); ‘the Lord crushed them for their sin’ (Sûrah 91:14); ‘God’s wrath’ (Sûrah 60:13); ‘painful punishment’ (Sûrahs 61:10 and 76:31); ‘God will never forgive them’ (Sûrah 63:6); ‘terrible punishment’ (65:8); ‘the punishment of the Hereafter’ (68:33); ‘a spine-crushing calamity will befall them’ (Sûrah 75:25); ‘overspread with darkness’ (Sûrah 80:41). ‘Garment of fire

will be cut for them, and boiling liquid shall be poured over their heads, by which their innards and their skin will be melted' (Sûrah 22:19-20).

Hell is the fate of disbelievers: those who do not submit to the revelations that God gives to Muhammad, and do not accept Muhammad as God's Messenger: *'As for those who disbelieve, garments of fire shall be cut for them, and boiling liquid shall be poured over their heads, by which their innards and their skin will be melted'* (Sûrah 22:19-20). *'Hast thou considered one who takes his caprice as his god, God having led him astray knowingly, and sealed his hearing and his heart, and placed a cover upon his sight?'* (Sûrah 45:23). The image behind *'caprice'* is a wind that blows a person off course, causing a fall. The Qur'an consistently sees events as issuing from God who controls creation. If a person is blown off course, the Qur'an teaches that it is God who had decided it to be that way.

Muhammad is very conscious of his role as one who warns. The Qur'an defines his mission as *'a warner and a bearer of good tidings'* (Sûrahs 6:48; 7:188; 11:2; 17:105; 46:1). In this he sees himself as carrying on the mission of earlier prophets whose mission is described in the same terms (Sûrahs 4:165; 6:48; 18:56).

Hell is mentioned in the New Testament, but nowhere near as frequently as in the Qur'an: only once in the Gospel of Mark (see Mark 9:43-47); four times in the Gospel of Matthew (see Matthew 5:22-30; 10:28; 18:9 and 23:15,33); once in Luke (see Luke 12:5); once in the Letter of James (see James 3:6), and once in the Second Letter of Peter (see 2 Peter 2:4).

'God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous' (Matthew 5:45). We noted earlier that God is compassionate and merciful. God does not stop loving us when we sin, nor does God punish us. Sin is our refusal to welcome this love. Jesus insists on the importance of the decisions we make. We will be judged by how we live, and to obstinately refuse God's invitation to love is to choose to exist cut off from God. Such an existence is *'hell'*.

The Christian view of hell is expressed by the Catholic Catechism (1994): *'To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from God for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called hell'* (n. 1033). Christians believe that God grants freedom to everyone and completely respects it. God never stops reaching out to all to attract us to enjoy divine communion. Jesus' prophetic message does include a warning. He alerts us to the importance, the eternal importance, of embracing the love God offers us. He sees the mission given him by God as a mission to reveal God as love, and to love us sinners in the hope that we would get in touch with our deepest yearning and discover who we truly are, and yield to the divine love that is always drawing us into communion. Jesus wants everyone to share in the intimate communion with God in the love that he experiences. To end our life in hell we have to break through the outstretched arms of Jesus on Calvary.

11. Texts that give divine authorisation for the use of force to propagate Islam.

The Qur'an presents Abraham as the first Muslim, the first to submit to the will of the One God. The Qur'an presents Muhammad, not as revealing a new religion, but as calling everyone

to strive to be faithful followers of Abraham. All who share Abraham's faith are true Muslims. This is especially true of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, and those who follow them faithfully. *'Strive for God as He should be striven for. He has chosen [for] you – and has placed no hardship for you in the religion – the creed of your father, Abraham. He named you Muslims aforetime, and herein, that the Messenger may be a witness for you, and that you may be witnesses for mankind. So perform the prayer and give the alms, and hold fast to God. He is your Master, and how excellent a Master, and how excellent a Helper' (Sûrah 22:78).*

God, as portrayed in the Qur'an, commands Muhammad and his followers to use every means to ensure victory over those who do not accept the Qur'an: *'I shall cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieve. So strike above the neck, and strike their every fingertip' (Sûrah 8:12). 'Fight them until there is no strife, and religion is wholly for God' (Sûrah 8:39). 'Know that whatsoever you take as spoils, a fifth is for God and the Messenger, and for kinsfolk, orphans, the indigent, and the traveller' (Sûrah 8:41). 'O you who believe! When you meet a company in battle, be firm and remember God much, that haply you may prosper' (Sûrah 8:12).*

Sûrah 8 deals, for the most part, with a revelation concerning the spoils of war, resulting from the victory of the Muslims at Badr against the army of the Quraysh from Mecca. Muhammad and his followers were doing what was customary among the Arabian tribes, attacking other tribes for booty and power. In this instance they were fighting for their life against the Quraysh of Mecca, Muhammad's own tribe. The fact that they were victorious was for them a sign that God was with them. *'Prepare for them what you can of strength [of arms] and horses tethered [for battle]. Frightening thereby the enemy of God and your enemy, and others besides them whom you know not. God knows them. Whatsoever you spend in the way of God will be paid unto you in full. And you shall not be wronged' (Sûrah 8:60). 'O prophet! Rouse the believers to fight' (Sûrah 8:65). 'It is not for a prophet to take captives until he overwhelms his enemy in the land' (Sûrah 8:67).*

Much of Sûrah 9 is addressed to those who failed to join Muhammad in his campaigns *'When the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wheresoever you find them, capture them, besiege them, and lie in wait for them in every place of ambush. But if they repent and perform the prayer and give the alms, then let them go their way. Truly, God is Forgiving, Merciful' (Sûrah 9:5). 'Fight those who believe not in God and in the Last Day, and who do not forbid what God and his Messenger have forbidden, and who follow not the Religion of Truth among those who were given the Book till they pay the Jizyah with a willing hand, being humbled' (Sûrah 9:29). 'Never pray over one of the disbelievers who dies, nor stand by his grave' (Sûrah 9:84).*

There are texts in the Qur'an that support the claim that it is God's will to use force to defend and to propagate religion. The word most non-Muslims are familiar with is the noun 'jihad' (from the Arabic root, j-h-d) – perhaps best translated as 'striving'. Sometimes jihad refers to the discipline required to submit to God's will. *'Strive [jahada] for God as He should be striven for. He has chosen [for] you - and has placed no hardship for you in the religion – the creed of your father, Abraham. He named you Muslims aforetime, and herein, that the Messenger may be a witness for you, and that you may be witnesses for mankind. So perform the prayer and give the alms, and hold fast to God. He is your Master, and how excellent a Master, and how excellent a Helper' (Sûrah 22:78).*

We have seen enough of the Sufi writings to see that in their striving to draw close to God, and their focus on the heart, they accent this aspect of jihad. This is true also of two movements in Islam from the nineteenth century. One is Baha'i founded in Iran by Baha'u'llah in 1863 and today numbering some 7 million adherents. The other is the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community founded in Punjab by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in 1889 and estimated as numbering today between 10 and 20 million adherents. Both these movements reject the use of violence to spread Islam. Ahmad argued that the violent sūras from Medina were intended only till Islam was established. Muslims should follow the earlier more peaceful sūrahs from Mecca. Both these movements suffer persecution from their fellow Muslims.

Muhammad is told *'There is no coercion in religion'* (Sūrah 2:256). *'Be gentle with the disbelievers; grant them respite for a while'* (Sūrah 86:17). However, there are many statements in the Qur'an that are used to support those who exert 'coercion in religion'!

'Strive in God's way so that haply you may prosper' (Sūrah 5:35). In the Qur'an 'striving in God's way' (*jihad fi sabil Allah*) normally means waging war to defend, but also to propagate Islam. 'Waging war' is part of 'God's way.' *'As for those who are slain in the way of God, He will not make their deeds go astray. He will guide them and set their state aright, and cause them to enter the Garden, having made it known to them'* (Sūrah 47:4-6). *'O Prophet! Strive against the disbelievers and the hypocrites, and be harsh with them. Their refuge is Hell'* (Sūrah 9:73, repeated in Sūrah 66:9). *'Those who were left behind exulted in staying back, opposing the Messenger of God and were averse to striving with their wealth and with their selves in the way of God. And they said "Go not forth in the heat." Say "The fire of Hell is of a heat more intense'* (Sūrah 9:81).

Muslims who refused to support Muhammad in waging war are threatened with hell for not joining the *mujahidin* (those who make jihad). They did not answer the summons. They failed to support the war. They failed to put their lives on the line. Only Muhammad, and after him only an imam, could proclaim *jihad*, but once it was proclaimed, every adult male must enrol.

The mainstream of Sunni Muslim *shari'ah* scholars believe and teach that jihad is acceptable or legitimate only in defence (*difa'i*), and cannot be initiated as aggressive (*ibtida'i*) war. In 1948 the highest authority within Sunni Islam, the sheikh of Al-Azhar Mosque and University in Egypt, Sheikh Mahmud Shaltuit, pronounced that only defensive jihad is permissible, and even then it has to be in keeping with the verse of the Qur'an that says: "Fight in the way of God those who fight you, but begin not hostilities. Verily, God loveth not aggressors" (2.190) page 150). The translation of this sūrah in *The Study Qur'an* reads: 'Fight in the way of God against those who fight against you, but do not *transgress*. Truly God loves not the *transgressors*'. This translation does not prohibit aggression.

Many texts speak of the use of force, without using the word '*jihad*'. Sometimes the focus is on defence: *'Fight in the way of God against those who fight against you, but do not transgress'* (Sūrah 2:190). *'Permission is granted to those who are fought, because they have been wronged – and truly God is able to help them – who were expelled from their homes without right, only for saying, "Our Lord is God". Were it not for God repelling people, some by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, wherein God's name is mentioned much, would have been destroyed. And God will surely help those who help Him – truly God is Strong, Mighty'* (Sūrah 22:39-40).

There are many texts in which waging war is not restricted to defence. *‘Those who believe fight in the way of God, and those who disbelieve fight in the way of false deities. Fight, therefore, against the allies of Satan’* (Sûrah 4:76). *‘Fight in the way of God. Thou art accountable only for thyself, and urge on the believers. It may be that God will restrain the might of the disbelievers, for God is stronger in might and more severe in punishment’* (Sûrah 4:84). *‘If the disbelievers turn their backs, then seize them and slay them wherever you find them, and take no protector or helper from among them’* (Sûrah 4:89).

‘The recompense of those who wage war against God and His Messenger and endeavour to work corruption upon the earth is that they be killed or crucified, or have their hands and feet cut off from opposite side or be banished from the land. That is their disgrace in this world and in the Hereafter theirs shall be a greater punishment’ (Sûrah 5:33).

God destroys towns (*‘How many a town have We destroyed’*, Sûrah 7:4), so it is logical for God’s followers to do so. When Muslims slay their enemies they are told: *‘You did not slay them, but God slew them’* (Sûrah 8:17). We find similar statements in the Hebrew Scriptures, but not in the Christian New Testament.

‘Fight them until there is no strife, and religion is wholly for God’ (Sûrah 8:39). *‘It is not for a prophet to take captives until he overwhelms his enemy in the land’* (Sûrah 8:67). *‘When the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wheresoever you find them, besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every ambush. But if they repent, and perform the prayer and give the alms, then let them go their way. Truly God is Forgiving, Merciful’* (Sûrah 9:5). *‘Fight those who believe not in God and in the Last Day, and who do not forbid what God and his Messenger have forbidden, and who follow not the Religion of Truth among those who were given the Book, till they pay the jizyah (tax) with a willing hand, being humbled’* (Sûrah 9:29).

To fulfil the mission given him by God, Muhammad felt obliged to spread belief by force of arms: *‘to make the Religion of Truth prevail over all religion’* (Sûrah 9:33). *‘When you meet those who disbelieve, strike at their necks; then, when you have overwhelmed them, tighten the bonds. Then free them graciously or hold them for ransom, till war lays down its burdens. Thus [shall it be]’* (Sûrah 47:4).

The Qur’an pictures God as a warrior God. The call to use violence to propagate what the Qur’an calls ‘the Religion of Truth’ is understandable in light of the tribal practices of the time. The problem is that Muhammad himself and his followers considered the above instructions as the words of God, with the consequence that they understood the use of force to be divinely sanctioned.

‘The recompense of those who wage war against God and His Messenger and endeavour to work corruption upon the earth is that they be killed or crucified, or have their hands and feet cut off from opposite sides or be banished from the land. That is their disgrace in this world and in the Hereafter theirs shall be a greater punishment ... As for the male thief and the female thief, cut off their hands’ (Sûrah 5:33 and 38).

It is one thing to see this as an expression of tribal practices in seventh century Arabia. It is quite another to see it as an expression of God’s will.

'God turned back those who disbelieved in their rage; they attained no good. God sufficed the believers in battle, and God is Strong, Mighty' (Sûrah 33:25). The background to this section is the failed attempt by a coalition to destroy the Muslims at the Battle of the Trench in 627AD. The coalition included Bani Nadîr, a Jewish tribe that Muhammad had expelled from Medina, Muhammad's own tribe, the Quraysh of Mecca, the desert tribe of Ghatafân, and the Banû Qurayzah, a Jewish tribe of Medina. The attempt failed in spite of the fact that Muhammad had, allegedly, about three thousand troops and faced the enemy who had an army of about ten thousand, as well as six hundred horses and many camels. After a month the siege of Medina was lifted. The Battle of the Trench was the last attempt by the Quraysh of Mecca to defeat Muhammad.

In the presentation of God as a warrior God and in the use of violence there are similarities with the Hebrew scriptures. Comparisons can be drawn between the tribal customs of Arabia and the tribal customs of Ancient Israel. Today scholars of the Hebrew Scriptures read the call to violence in the context in which the Scriptures were written. As we have seen there are Muslims who would like to read the Qur'an in the same way. Violence is seen as the expression, not of God's will, but of the limited understanding of the time.

The Qur'an assumes that the enemies of the Muslims are God's enemies: *'Whosoever is an enemy of God, His angels and His messengers, and Gabriel and Michael: God is indeed the enemy of the disbelievers'* (Sûrah 2:98). *'Prepare for them what you can of strength of arms and horses tethered for battle, frightening thereby the enemy of God, and your enemy'* (Sûrah 8:60). *'O you who believe! Take not Mine enemy and your enemy as friends'* (Sûrah 60:1).

At times the Ancient Israelites shared this assumption, an assumption that Jesus rejected (see *Matthew 5:43-48*). Paul writes: *'If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink'* (*Romans 12:20*). Jesus' command was that we love our enemies (*Matthew 5:44*). In the early centuries when Christianity suffered persecution, it grew, not by the power of the sword, but through the attraction of love and the meaning it offered people. In 380AD Emperor Theodosius I made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. After that the state made up of Christians waged war, as Jews had done, and as Muslims were to do. When so-called Christian states did this, they were acting as states, not as Christians. They could not find support from the New Testament.

The early histories of the spread of the Christian religion and the Muslim religion are very different. From the beginning Islam has included a political component. Force was used first of all to get what was needed to support the Muslim community. Such was a common practice in tribal Arabia. It was used also against those who resisted Islam, and, when the Muslim community was strong enough, force was used to spread Islam. Muhammad himself took part in 27 raids between his arrival at Medina and his death. By contrast, for the first three hundred years Christians had no defence against those who tried to crush them, and the spread of Christianity resulted from its commitment to love and the meaning that people found in it. When, in the fourth century, Christianity was established as the official religion of the Roman State the state continued to use force to strengthen its hold on power. When such force was used it was in the interest of the state, not of Christianity, and was a failure to obey the revelation that is at the heart of the Christian way of life.

Muslims claimed the right to use force and quoted from the Qur'an to support their claim. This is a hugely important difference, and one that we all need to explore if Muslims and Christians are to find common ground in our pursuit of peace. The Christian position is not complicated: Jesus taught us to love our enemies. The Qur'an presents a different picture.

The Study Quran quotes the following hadith (page 1808). Muhammad is quoted as saying: 'I have been commanded to fight the people until they bear witness that there is no god but God and Muhammad is God's Messenger, perform the prayer and pay the alms. When they have done this, their blood and property are safe from me, except for what Islamic law requires, and then the reckoning is up to God.'

All religions must respect people's freedom of conscience in following the way of life that they find gives meaning to their life, while respecting other people's freedom to follow a different path. This involves respect for one's own and other people's conscience. If we employ force to override a person's freedom in this matter, and if we do so in God's name, we undermine religion and present a false God.

If we are using force because our sacred literature requires it, we must realise that all human words, however inspired, are human words, with all the beauty and power of human words, but also with the limitations that any word has in regard to the most profound questions facing us. If sacred texts encourage the use of force, we must accept the fact that in this the texts are faulty. We must purify our notion of God and learn to recognise the historical context out of which these faulty human words came. We must learn from experience, and together enlighten each other about our notion of God. We can learn from each other instead of fighting to defend our necessarily limited understanding.

If only we could all learn to break free from using the name of God to support aggression, we might find a way to draw closer to each other and mutually contribute to world peace and to see God as a God of Love who wants us all to live together in a respectful and joyful communion. Christianity teaches that God's merciful forgiveness embraces every human being, whatever his or her religious persuasion. Yet how hard it is for any of us to find the humility and trust to live together in peace.

12. Care for the poor

Another central thrust of the Qur'an is God's will that we care for the poor. Muhammad was orphaned as a child, an experience that remained with him all his life. *'By the morning brightness, and by the night when still, your Lord has not forsaken you; nor does He despise. And the Hereafter shall be better for you than this life. And surely your Lord will give to you, and you will be content. Did He not find you [Muhammad] an orphan and shelter you, find you astray and guide you, and find you in need and enrich you? So as for the orphan, scorn not. And as for one who requests, repel not. And for the Blessing of the Lord, proclaim'* (Surah 93).

'By the morning brightness, and by the night when still, thy Lord has not forsaken thee; nor does He despise. And the Hereafter shall be better for thee than this life. And surely the Lord will give unto thee, and thou shalt be content. Did He not find thee an orphan and shelter, find thee astray and guide, and find thee in need and enrich? So as for the orphan scorn not. And

as for one who requests, repel not. And as for the blessing of the Lord, proclaim!’ (Sûrah 92:20-21).

‘Piety is he ... who gives wealth, despite loving it, to kinsfolk, orphans, the indigent, the traveller, beggars, and for [the ransom of] slaves; and performs the prayer and gives the alms; and those who fulfil their oaths when they pledge them; and those who are patient in misfortune, hardship, and moments of peril. It is they who are the sincere, and it is they who are the reverent’ (Sûrah 2:177).

The Qur’an speaks of the fate of those *‘who honour not the orphan, nor urge you the feeding of the indigent. You devour inheritance with rapacious devouring, and love wealth with abounding love’ (Sûrah 89:17-19). ‘The steep pass is the freeing of a slave, or giving food at a time of famine to an orphan near of kin, or an indigent, clinging to the dust, while being one of those who believe and exhort one another to patience, and exhort one another to compassion. Those are the companions of the right. And those who disbelieve in Our signs, they are the companions of the left. Upon them is Fire enclosed’ (Sûrah 90:13-20).*

‘Be virtuous toward parents and kinsfolk, toward orphans and the indigent, toward the neighbour who is of kin and the neighbour who is not of kin, toward the companion at your side and the traveller, and toward those whom your right hands possess [your slaves]’ (Sûrah 4:36).

The New Testament is full of the call to justice, especially in regard to the poor. Luke has Jesus define his ministry as *‘bringing good news to the poor’ (Luke 4:18)*. Jesus challenged his contemporaries: *‘When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame’ (Luke 14:13)*. It is sufficient to recall Jesus’ parable in which he speaks of what ultimately matters in human behaviour (see *Matthew 25:34-46*). We will be judged on how we treat the poor.

‘An honourable word and forgiveness are better than an act of charity followed by injury. God is Self-Sufficient, Clement. O you who believe! Do not annul your acts of charity through preening and injury, like the person who spends his wealth to be seen by men and believes not in God and the Last Day’ (Sûrah 2:263-264). Elements of this good advice are found in the words of Jesus: *‘Whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you’ (Matthew 6:2-4).*

‘Give to the kinsman his right, and to the indigent, and the traveller, but do not squander wastefully’ (Sûrah 17:26).

In his teaching on giving what we have to those in need, Jesus calls us to what this sûrah may consider under *‘squander wastefully’*. Jesus reveals God’s love as unconditional and extravagant. He calls his followers to emulate that love. *‘If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your*

enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous’ (*Matthew 5:40-45*).

James includes in his definition of religion ‘to care for orphans and widows in their distress’ (*James 1:27*). He insists on action, not words: ‘If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says: “Go in peace, keep warm, and eat your fill,” without supplying their bodily needs, what is the good of that?’ (*James 2:15-16*). He categorises neglecting the poor and ‘spending what you get on your pleasures’ as equivalent to adultery, for it is to break our part in our covenant with God (see *James 4:3-4*). ‘The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, wages that you have kept back by fraud, cry out to God’ (*James 5:4*).

Sûrah 2 ends with a prayer: ‘Our Lord, impose not upon us that which we have not the strength to bear! And pardon us, forgive us and have mercy on us. You are our Master, so help us against the disbelieving people’ (*Sûrah 2:286*).

Epilogue

I have been working on this paper for many years, because I share the conviction that we must all contribute what we can to a better understanding of Christianity and Islam if our world is to enjoy peace and prosperity. I can only hope that my small contribution will be found helpful. By way of conclusion, I wish here to underline the main ideas that have come to me during this time. Islam had its beginnings in a violent world, which helps explain the inclusion in the Qur’an of instructions, purporting to come from God, to use every means, including violence, to protect and propagate Islam, the ‘*Religion of Truth*’. Jesus, too, lived in a violent world. His response was to reveal God as Love and to teach us to love our neighbours, including our enemies. My prayer is that Christians will learn to follow Jesus faithfully in this, and that Muslims will see the statements in the Qur’an that support violence as a seventh century response that is understandable in the context, but that does not represent the will of God. Freed from this idea, Islam will be free to make its contribution to our search for meaning, and to the building of peace in this ‘our common home’. Christians believe that it is Jesus whose humanity best reveals God and reveals God as Love - that is as Self-giving.

Clearly God transcends any understanding we can have or any words we can use to express our understanding. It is essential that we humbly acknowledge that religious texts are human documents. We may cherish these texts as inspired by God, because we find them inspiring. Especially significant here are the Sacred Writings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, because for many hundreds of years they have continued to nourish people’s lives. There is a temptation for the followers of a religious tradition to think of their foundational texts as coming directly from God. Lifted in this way above human authorship, the texts can be judged to avoid contextual analysis. If we are to contribute to the search for meaning, we must acknowledge this as a temptation and act against it. Such is our propensity for self-deception that we need each other’s help if we are going to maintain the humility that is necessary in all that we say about God.

I pray that this paper may assist Christians to appreciate the contribution Islam has made to our search for meaning: its fidelity to Muhammad's central mystical experience of the Oneness of God; its highlighting, however imperfectly, of God's compassion and readiness to forgive; its call to prayer; its care for orphans, for the poor and for strangers. I pray that this paper may assist Muslims to find these same values in Christianity.

A plea from Saint Paul to the Christian community in Philippi: "If then there is any appeal in Christ, any consolation from love, any communion in the Spirit, any movements of compassion and feelings of love, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one soul and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition. Do not strive after or seek to find your value in things that are worthless, but in humility regard others above yourselves, so that not everyone is focused on themselves, but each is looking to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (*Philippians 2:1-5*).

I conclude with two of my favourite sūrahs. *'By the morning brightness, and by the night when still, thy Lord has not forsaken thee; nor does He despise. And the Hereafter shall be better for thee than this life. And surely the Lord will give unto thee, and thou shalt be content. Did He not find thee an orphan and shelter, find thee astray and guide, and find thee in need and enrich? So as for the orphan scorn not. And as for one who requests, repel not. And as for the blessing of the Lord, proclaim!'* (Sūrah 93). Muhammad the orphan found his Guide and Protector in God and was moved to proclaim to others the Lord's blessing.

'In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds, the Compassionate, the Merciful. Master of the Day of Judgment. Thee we worship, and from Thee we seek help. Guide us upon the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed' (Sūrah 1).

Amen.