

CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS

From double standards to mutual
understanding

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CONTENTS

<i>Preface and acknowledgements</i>	viii
<i>Abbreviations and technicalities</i>	ix
Introduction	1
The problem	1
A possible solution: the approach which will be adopted	9
1 Origins	17
Introduction	17
Christian origins	17
The establishment of the Muslim community	24
Some similarities	27
Conclusion	29
2 Scriptures	32
Introduction	32
Contents and form	32
Compilation and editing	35
Later developments in the understanding of “scripture”	40
Conclusion	29
3 The development of religious thought	48
Introduction	48
Early Christian thought	
a) Internal	48

b)	External	53
	Early Muslim thought	
a)	Internal	48
b)	External	60
	Conclusion	61
4	Law and ethics	67
	Introduction	67
	Islamic law	67
	Christian ethics	71
	A case-study: Christian and Muslim thinking on the position of women in society	74
	Conclusion	78
5	Worship and spirituality	84
	Introduction	84
	Christian worship	84
	Muslim worship	88
	Christian and Muslim spirituality	
a)	Mysticism	91
b)	Sacrifice	93
c)	Letters from prison	97
	Conclusion	100
6	Unity and diversity	106
	Introduction	106
	The Islamic community	106
	The Christian community	112
	Ecumenism	120
	Some similarities...?	122
	Conclusion	123

7	Spread and history	128
	Introduction	128
	The spread of Islam in history	129
	The spread of Christianity in history	135
	The treatment of subject peoples and minorities	142
	Conclusion	146
8	Modern developments	149
	Introduction	149
	The phenomenon of modernity	149
	One reaction—"fundamentalism"	156
	Another reaction—liberalism	161
	Tolerance and dissent	163
	Conclusion	166
	Conclusion	170
	Introduction	170
	Conversion between the two traditions	170
	How to picture the relationship between the two traditions	172
	<i>Bibliography</i>	179
	<i>Index</i>	187

INTRODUCTION

The problem

In the world of today Christians and Muslims together make up something between a third and a half of the world's population of six billion (six thousand million) people. So-called global statistics are never much more than estimates, but serious attempts to calculate the figures generally result in a figure of between eight hundred million and one thousand two hundred million for the Muslim community and a figure of between one thousand two hundred million and one thousand eight hundred million for the Christian community.

The level of mutual understanding between these two communities, however, is often very low; indeed it could be said that mutual ignorance is far more widespread than mutual understanding. For example, a British-based Muslim who was born and educated in South Asia told the story of his Christian (Jesuit) school teacher who surprised him one day by asking him why Muslims worshipped pigs. It has to be said that an absolutely basic understanding of Islam should be enough to make it clear that, whatever else Muslims do, they certainly do not worship pigs, since Islam is an insistent monotheistic faith. Further conversation between teacher and pupil revealed that what lay behind the former's question was this: he had observed that in South Asian society members of the Hindu community do not eat beef, and he had gathered that the reason for this was that cows were considered to be in some sense sacred animals and so their meat was not to be eaten. He had also observed that members of the Muslim community did not eat pork, and he simply assumed that what lay behind this was a similar belief, that pigs were considered sacred and worshipped. The question therefore did have a certain logic to it, but it cannot be denied that it was based on ignorance.¹

A kind of mirror-image of this ignorance is the widespread conviction among Muslims that Christians worship three gods. It has to be admitted that this view is of a rather different order from the supposition that Muslims worship pigs, since it is a view which is at least suggested in the Muslim scripture, the Qur' n, which in a number of places (for example [Chapter Four](#), verse 171 and [Chapter Five](#), verses 71 and 72) seems to accuse Christians of believing in three deities, but it is a view which the overwhelming majority of Christians utterly reject, and so as a comment on what Christians actually believe, it has to be said that this view is based on ignorance.

Mutual ignorance, then, is one obstacle in the way of mutual understanding between Christians and Muslims. There is also, however, a more subtle and a difficult problem which needs to be confronted, for in the long, often acrimonious history of relationships between Christians and Muslims, one of the major problems has been, and still is, the application of what in almost any other walk of life would be called double standards. Christians and Muslims, in other words, each apply one set of standards or criteria to their own faith and a completely different set of standards to the faith of the other.

It has to be said that this is not a new perception; it was Karl Marx who first drew attention to theologians who insisted that their own faith was from God while insisting that the faith of everyone else was a human construct, in his *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847).² But the consequences of this attitude are perhaps particularly dangerous in the twentieth/fourteenth century, when Christians and Muslims find themselves living in close proximity to each other, and therefore needing, for better for worse, to co-exist rather more peaceably than may often have been the case in the past.

Let me therefore give one or two examples, at different levels, of how double standards are applied by members of the two communities. Firstly there is the case of those evangelical Christians in Britain who protest vociferously about the missionary activities of Muslim organizations in the West; “there should be a law against it”, the cry goes up. Yet these same evangelical Christians are those who are the keenest supporters of Christian missionary activities, sometimes of an extremely insensitive kind, in Islamic societies, and who see any Muslim opposition to these Christian missionary activities as proof of Islam's innate hostility not only to Christianity but also to any idea of religious freedom or tolerance! The link between these two views is obviously not clear to those who hold it.

Secondly, among Muslims, there are often vehement protests against the support, both in finance and in other ways, which is given to, for example, the ancient Christian churches of the Middle East, by Christians in the West. The protest goes up that this is external interference, even a modern kind of religious imperialism. It has to be said, of course, that there is a considerable element of truth in the charge with reference to, for example, nineteenth/thirteenth century history, for in that period the various Christian churches of the Middle East were indeed used by the rival powers of Europe as a way of extending their influence; thus the French developed links with the Catholics, the Russians with the Orthodox, and the British with whoever was left, since the Protestants were relatively few in number, and this therefore meant other minority communities such as the Jews, and the Druzes in the Lebanon. There is therefore some justification for Muslim resentment of these external influences. But if we move into the twentieth/fourteenth century and look at the situation of the Muslim community in, for example, Britain, we find that a remarkably similar process seems to be developing in reverse, namely that the various rival powers in Islamic societies are all seeking to further their influence among Muslim minorities such as those in Britain and Europe. Thus considerable efforts are made, through the provision of personnel and finance, to ensure that it is Sa'udi, or Iranian, or Libyan, or Egyptian, or Pakistani, or Iraqi or whatever interpretations of Islam that gain the upper hand. But most Muslims in Britain see any resentment of this process not as a mirror image of their own resentment of earlier foreign influence in Islamic societies but rather as a clear demonstration of British prejudice and discrimination against Muslims.³

In the aftermath of the Gulf Crisis, a number of incidents serve as mirror-images to each other in demonstrating a more contemporary aspect to these resentments. At the time of the Suez Campaign in 1956/1376, when Britain, France and Israel joined together in using military force in order to recover control of the Suez Canal from President Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir of Egypt, among those who were unwitting victims of the campaign were a considerable number of Egyptian Copts, whose churches were burnt down by furious Muslims; and now, in 1990/1411, we have reports of attempts by right-wing elements in British society to burn down the Saddam Hussain mosque in the West Midlands.⁴ Incidents such as these, regrettable as they are, do at least perhaps serve to show the urgency of the task of clarifying the many influences at work on relationships between Christians and Muslims, and of high-lighting double standards where they are at work; and, of

course, they also show clearly how the migrations of large numbers of people since the end of World War II has brought about a kind of reciprocity between the treatment of Christian minorities in Islamic societies and the treatment of Muslim minorities in the West.

On an international level too double standards are sometimes evident today. The crisis in Bosnia is well-known and highly-publicised. Here we have a fierce conflict between the Bosnian government, most of whose members are Muslim, and Bosnian Serbs and Croats, almost all of whom are respectively Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians, and this conflict is widely understood in the Muslim world as being the result of an anti-Islamic conspiracy on the part of Western powers, who are accused of conspicuous reluctance to become involved in the defence of justice and a legitimate government, especially as compared with their eagerness to resort to military action in the case of defending Kuwait a short time ago. In Africa, however, in the Sudan, a not dissimilar situation exists. Here southern, mainly black, Christians, are attempting to secure a greater measure of political independence from the northern, mainly Arabic-speaking Muslim, government, which has been accused of implementing some fairly savage measures against Christians in order to crush the movement for more independence. Any criticism of such government actions on the part of western Christians, however, is seen by many Muslims as an unjustified interference in the internal affairs of the country.

As a balance to this, it is also true that many Christians dismiss the suggestion that there is any Christian involvement in the Bosnian crisis by simply asserting that it is nothing to do with religion, or at least with "true Christianity". The same was often said about the conflicts in Northern Ireland or in South Africa, about which it was also often asserted that they were nothing to do with true religion, despite the frequent use of religious vocabulary and rhetoric for the legitimisation of their positions by many of those most intimately involved in the conflicts. Such Christians are very insistent, however, that the conflict in the Sudan, or the First Gulf War between Iraq and Iran, are essentially and indeed primarily religious, so that any attempt to point to other factors, political, social, economic and cultural, which are involved in the conflict, is determinedly resisted and presented as an attempt to evade or provide a distraction from the religious dimension of the struggle. Double standards are thus applied in both communities, especially in the sense that both Christians and Muslims sometimes use narrow definitions (i.e. only a few people are "really" Christian or Muslim) with reference to their own community while using broad

definitions (i.e. everyone who has any connection, however tenuous, with the Christian or Muslim faiths, should be described as Christian or Muslim) with reference to the other community.⁵

Something similar also happens in the discussion of historical events so that, for example, the interpretation of the expulsion of the Muslims from Spain after the Reconquista at the end of the fifteenth/ninth century is presented by some Muslim writers as an example of Christian prejudice against and intolerance of Muslims. One recent discussion, by a Western convert to Islam, of these events is entitled “Blood on the cross”.⁶ Any attempt by a Western scholar to provide any justification or explanation for the Spanish decision to proceed in this way, because of suspicion that Muslims might act as a kind of fifth column within the Spanish state, is dismissed.⁷ A similar sequence of events in the life of Muhammad, however, namely the expulsion and then massacre of the Jewish tribes in Medina, is presented as a quite justifiable act on the basis of the risk of subversion to the Muslim state by the members of those tribes. Conversely Christian writers over the centuries have not hesitated to argue that Muhammad’s treatment of the Jews is clear evidence that his claim to prophethood should not be taken seriously, while the actions of the Spanish monarchs should be seen as perfectly legitimate defences of the interests of the state. Similar historical events are therefore interpreted completely differently, and in the process double standards are clearly employed.⁸

The interpretation of current events also serves as an example of double standards, especially with reference to such things as natural disasters. Thus when floods affect, for example, affect the United States of America, magazines in some parts of the Muslim world pronounce confidently that the floods are the judgement of God upon a wicked and sinful nation. A different tone, however, is adopted when a third of Pakistan disappears under the flood waters of the River Indus a few months later. Equally when floods affect a part of the Muslim world, such as Pakistan, some Christian magazines confidently assert that they are a divine judgement upon Islam, but a different interpretation is presented when hurricanes lash the coast of Florida. The readiness of such magazines to exult at the execution of God’s judgement, always, of course, on someone else, displays an interesting religious understanding of God’s involvement in the current affairs of the world, but it also displays a certain inconsistency, at the very least.⁹

Different perspectives are also sometimes evident in the interpretations put upon incidents in which large numbers of people, as a result of the influence of a religious teacher, perform actions which

have disastrous consequences: examples of this are the mass suicide of a Christian community at Jonestown in Central America in 1978/1398 or the more recent destruction of a Christian community at Waco in Texas in 1993/1413 in a Christian context, and the incident in Pakistan in 1983/1403 where, at the bidding of a female Shī‘ teacher, a number of Pakistani Shī‘ s walked into the sea off Karachi, having been told that they would walk through the sea to the Shī‘ shrines in Iraq, and drowned. It is important, however, that these events are interpreted on the basis of the same criteria and according to similar standards.¹⁰

Another area in which double standards are sometimes applied is over the whole question of unity and diversity within the two traditions. What tends to happen here is that Christians and Muslims each insist that the manifold divisions within their own community are not on matters of fundamental importance, and so Christians and Muslims “really” agree with all other members of their own community, whereas the equally manifold (and manifest) divisions of the other are presented as inherent to the fissiparous nature of the other’s community, and thus demonstrate the lack of stability and cohesion in the other’s faith. Muslim writers thus insist that the Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries CE are clear proof of the incoherence of Christian theology, while arguing that the differences between the various schools of thought which evolved in India in the nineteenth/thirteenth century by no means discredit the claim of Muslims to be a united community. And Christians sometimes point with glee to the current rivalries between Sunn and Shī‘ Muslims as clear evidence of the fragmentation of the Muslim community while conveniently forgetting the Wars of Religion in Western Europe in the sixteenth/tenth and seventeenth/eleventh centuries, which left half the population of some parts of Germany, for example, dead.¹¹

There is a contemporary aspect to this issue too because of the emergence in both traditions, in the nineteenth/thirteenth and twentieth/fourteenth centuries particularly, of movements which are claimed by their adherents to be renewal movements and yet which are seen by the majority in each tradition as being suspect, or even non-Christian or non-Muslim. Sometimes here too double standards are applied: how many Christians see Muslim harassment of the Ahmadiyya in the Indian Sub-Continent, or of the Bahá’ís in Iran as proof of the intolerance and inflexibility of Islam, while themselves seeking to restrict the activities and freedom of the so-called “new religious movements” in Christian societies which in their origins have some kind of link with the Christian tradition yet which have also evolved in their own rather

distinctive way? And how many Muslims argue that the emergence of the Unitarian Church in Europe, for example, or the Mormon Church or the Jehovah's Witnesses and other American "sects" in the nineteenth/thirteenth century, was a sign of the re-emergence of original and authentic Christianity, while arguing that the Ahmadiyya and the Bah ' s are no more than apostates, who therefore deserve a harsh punishment?¹²

Yet another area of difficulty concerns the approach used to the study of the two faiths. Here the problem is simply that the number of people who have roughly equal expertise in the studies of the two faiths can more or less be counted on two hands. What happens, therefore, is that some figures who are extremely learned in one tradition are crassly ignorant in the other. This can be illustrated by the experience of the twentieth/fourteenth century Christian theologian Paul Tillich, who pronounced on Buddhism on one occasion but included in his pronouncement an error for which he was criticised in the Harvard University student paper by an undergraduate, who was thus able to point out the ignorance of the eminent theologian with respect to the religious traditions of Asia.¹³ Ironically, it is not always the faith of the other that people are ignorant of, for one of the interesting things about modern interaction between Christians and Muslims is the extent to which some in each tradition are formidably learned in the tradition of the other but apparently rather ignorant of their own. Examples of this might be the contemporary Muslim writer Shabbir Akhtar, who sometimes seems more at home with the detail of modern Western religious thought than its Islamic equivalent, or the nineteenth/thirteenth century Protestant missionary to Muslims K.F.Pfander, who was rare in those days in that he had undertaken serious study of Islam, but on the other hand was rather unfamiliar with the intra-Christian debates of his own day. This had some unforeseen consequences when he was presented with the latest Biblical criticism in a public debate in Agra in North India in 1854/1270 and was unable to respond effectively to his Muslim protagonists who were familiar with it.¹⁴

What is at stake here, therefore, is essentially the use of "critical" or "radical" scholarship, and particularly the tendency of some Christians and some Muslims to make good use of the findings and arguments of critical scholars with reference to the tradition of the other while unquestioningly prohibiting, or vetoing them with reference to their own tradition. Thus *The Myth of God Incarnate*, edited by John Hick,¹⁵ was rapidly taken up and translated into Arabic in Cairo because it was seen to support the traditional Islamic view that the Christian language about

Jesus is not true. John Hick was even the first Christian theologian to receive an official invitation to lecture at an Islamic University in Sa'udi Arabia on the strength of the book (which he declined). *Hagarism*, by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, however, with its attempt to reconstruct the emergence of the Islamic community by the use of sources other than Islamic ones, with some rather radical results, was excoriated by the same Muslims in Cairo,¹⁶ and John Wansbrough the author of *Qur'anic Studies*,¹⁷ again a "radical" attempt to reconstruct the processes by which the Qur' n was assembled and interpreted is reported as having received a death threat for his efforts, as a result of which he moved his field of research back to the comparatively tranquil pastures of the treaties worked out between Crusaders and Muslims in the Middle East in the twelfth/sixth and thirteenth/seventh centuries! Some Christians, however, lapped up the conclusions of Crone and Cook and of Wansbrough as proof of the fraudulent nature of Islam's claims for its origins and its scripture, while claiming that "The Myth" was an unacceptable travesty of the development of early Christian thought.¹⁸

Another comparison of this kind might be between the so-called *Gospel of Barnabas*, almost certainly written by a sixteenth/tenth century Spanish Jew who had been forcibly converted to Christianity by the Inquisition in Venice and who then converted to Islam in order to get his own back, yet widely-accepted by modern Muslims as being the original authentic and uncorrupted account of Jesus' life and work, and the incident of "The Satanic Verses", made widely-known by the novel of the same name by Salman Rushdie, which has been taken up and used by many Christians as being evidence from within the Muslim tradition for the existence of error within the text of the Qur' n, which is then taken as disproving any claim to divine authorship.¹⁹

Perhaps the most fundamental area in which double standards are applied, however, is in Christians' and Muslims' assessment of each other's faith. In particular, what is involved here is the recurring tendency in both communities to compare the *ideals* of their own faith with the *realities* of the other. Christians, in other words, are adept at comparing the wonderful ideals of the Christian faith with the painful realities of Islamic societies, and Muslims are equally expert at highlighting the obvious problems in societies influenced by the Christian faith while pointing to never-implemented Islamic ideals as the solution to these problems. Thus Christians point to the conflicts and violence evident in different parts of the Middle East and attribute these things to Islam, while insisting that Christianity is a religion of peace

and the problems of Northern Ireland or South Africa are nothing at all to do with Christianity; and Muslims say that Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance, so the problems of the Middle East are nothing to do with Islam since “those involved are not true Muslims”—that great ideal excuse which is used so often in both communities! And then the same Muslims go on to suggest that Western societies are riddled with problems of sexual promiscuity, drug abuse and economic inequality, and these things are all the direct result of Christianity.²⁰

The two communities, of course, bitterly resent the other’s caricature of themselves, but only rarely does this affect their continuing love of their own caricature of the other, which they love because it makes them feel good—and superior.

A possible solution: the approach which will be adopted

This, then, is the background and context in which I wonder if there is not a place, or even a rather urgent need, for this kind of book, namely a study of Christianity and Islam that approaches the two traditions, as far as is possible, in the same way, using the same criteria.

Is this possible? In an ultimate sense, the answer has to be “probably not”, yet the attempt is, as I have already suggested, a matter of some urgency. I am bold enough to suggest that my own background may be helpful to such a first shot, or if that metaphor is inappropriate in the light or earlier history, such a first attempt, for my formal academic qualifications do not include a degree in Christian theology, in other words in the elaboration of my own tradition, but they do include a degree in Islamic History, which involved investigation of the tradition of “the other”, as well as a Ph.D. in the interaction of the two traditions, under the overall title of Theology. Two useful features may result from this apparent paradox; firstly an awareness of the *different levels* at which both faiths work—the Islam (or Christianity) of the theologians may work somewhat differently from the Islam (or Christianity) of the humble believer—the faith as lived, in other words. And secondly an awareness of *the tension that exists between the view of the insider and the view of the outsider*, as exemplified by the conviction of many believers, both Christian and Muslim, that phenomenological studies of their faith miss out on certain vital aspects of their faith. The attempt will thus be made to outline the meaning as well as the form of the various elements of the two faiths.²¹

All this is not to underestimate the difficulty of the task, but it does, I hope, highlight the one vital principle which must serve as the basis of the attempt, and that is that no criterion of judgement can be applied to the faith of the other that has not already been applied to one's own faith. There must, in other words, be no double standards.

In particular, what is not permissible is the pattern outlined above whereby "critical" standards are applied to the faith of the other but not permitted with reference to one's own faith. Either critical standards must be applied equally to both, or else they must be applied to neither. And just to make it absolutely clear, my view-point is that they must be applied to both! "Critical", however, does not mean "negative" so much as "analytical", and so the approach may perhaps also be described as being that of "critical sympathy", since there is no intention to be pejorative or dismissive.²²

How then might this approach work out in practice? Fundamentally, it must clearly involve some kind of parallelism, some kind of comparative approach, for if both Islam and Christianity are religious systems, and if they are both multi-dimensional phenomena, then many of the same elements will be present in both traditions. They will probably be put together in different ways, of course, and different priorities will be given to different features in the two traditions, but there will be some commonality.²³

Additionally, the approach will then be historical, seeing both Christianity and Islam as faiths which have developed over the centuries and which have evolved in a wide variety of contexts, both geographical and cultural, and phenomenological, in the sense of attempting, insofar as is possible, to outline the two traditions accurately from a neutral and independent standpoint. This does not mean, however, that the two faiths will simply be described with respect to their outward forms; an attempt will also be made to give some insight into their inner meaning and the effects that they have in the lives of their adherents.²⁴

On this basis eight themes will therefore be investigated in the chapters which follow. Each chapter investigates a different aspect of the two traditions, and I have tried to vary the diet so that some chapters begin with the Christian tradition and then move to the Islamic tradition before drawing out some comparisons, highlighting areas of similarity and of difference ([Chapters One, Three and Five](#)), other chapters reverse the order, investigating the Muslim tradition first and then moving to the Christian tradition ([Chapters Four, Six and Seven](#)), and two chapters (Two and Eight) are organised on a more comparative basis throughout.

The whole approach adopted in this book obviously carries a number of risks, not least the danger of superficiality, since entire undergraduate textbooks are written on subjects which will be treated here in half of a chapter!²⁵ But given the problems of ignorance and of double standards which have been outlined earlier it does seem important to produce a book which will give an overview of both traditions despite the risk of generalisation, and my hope is that at least the generalisations will be equally sweeping about both traditions!

Given that the book is being written in English I have usually referred to other material in English in references and in the Bibliography, since it is this material which will be most easily available to English-speakers.²⁶ Inevitably this means that important discussions in other languages concerning both traditions have been omitted, but while English is clearly the original language of neither the Christian nor Muslim communities, it is certainly one of the most widely-used languages in the Christian world today and is also perhaps the second most-widely used language of the Muslim world.

The hope of the author is therefore that this may be a book about both Christianity and Islam which will be useful to both Christians and Muslims, and that it may contribute to the development of authentic mutual understanding between the two communities. The recent work of Edward Said, entitled *Orientalism*,²⁷ which suggests that for all the so-called objectivity and impartiality of early modern Western studies of the Orient, the picture presented of it was in fact vitiated by suspect pre-suppositions if not downright prejudice, so that the works of Orientalists reveal as much if not more about them than about their supposed subject-matter, makes the difficulty of this task abundantly clear, especially since there is also a kind of “Occidentalism”, a mirrorimage of Orientalism in which certain descriptions of the West appear again and again in Muslim writings and perhaps reveal as much about those who make them as about the reality of the West itself. But a verse from the Qur’ n (49:13) suggests both that the task is important and that the aim is not unattainable:

wa ja‘aln kum shu‘ ban wa qab ‘ila li-ta‘ raf

We (i.e. God) have made you peoples and tribes so that you can get to know each other.

Notes

- 1 Today's Jesuits are considerably better-informed and educated concerning other religious traditions.
- 2 See D.McLellan *Karl Marx: selected writings*, Oxford U.P., 1977, p 209.
- 3 One of the interesting features of *The Muslim Manifesto*, produced by the Muslim Institute in London and its director, Dr Kalim Siddiqui, in 1990, is its explicit suggestion that the nineteenth/thirteenth century development of links between Middle Eastern Christians and different European powers should be taken as a model by Muslim minorities in Europe today, who should actively seek Middle Eastern "protectors". See p 22 of the "Manifesto".
- 4 See the report in "The Times" on 18th September 1990.
- 5 Thus some Christians unhesitatingly describe Saddam Hussain as a devout Muslim because he has been seen speaking to an Imam, while Radovan Karadzic is, in their view, not a "true" Christian despite the fact that he is seen talking to a Serbian Orthodox priest (and vice versa). Another example of different conflicts being judged by different standards is the fact that during the last two years two capital cities in different parts of the world have been subjected to siege, Sarajevo (the Bosnian capital) and Kabul (the Afghan capital); it seems likely that more people have been killed in the latter (12,000 as opposed to 10,000 for Sarajevo), but because the quarrel around Kabul is an intra-Muslim one it has sometimes been interpreted in a different way from the Bosnian dispute.
- 6 A.Thompson *Blood on the cross*, Ta-Ha, 1989.
- 7 See, for example, John Edwards "Mission and inquisition among conversos and Moriscos in Spain, 1250-1550" in W.J.Shiels (ed.) *Persecution and toleration* (Studies in Church History, 21), Blackwell, 1984, pp 139-151.
- 8 There has been a considerable amount of recent scholarly discussion concerning Muhammad's treatment of the Jews, and especially concerning the historicity or otherwise of the massacre of the Ban Qurayza. See W.N. Arafat "New light on the story of Ban Qurayza and the Jews of Medina" in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1976, pp 100-107, B. Ahmad *Muhammad and the Jews*, Vikas, New Delhi, 1979, and M.J. Kister "The massacre of the Ban Qurayza" in *Jerusalem studies in Arabic and Islam*, 6 (1986), pp 61-96.
- 9 An example of this in Christian literature may be seen in the magazine *Prophecy today*, which displays a rather gloating tone in its commentary on events in the Muslim world on pages 26-27 of its March/April 1992 number (Volume 8, number 2): "Late last year yet another disaster hit the Muslim world. On 14 December, in one of the world's worst shipping accidents in recent years, 476 passengers and crew drowned when the

Egyptian ferry Salem Express returning from Jeddah struck a coral reef ten miles off the port of Safaga, on Egypt's east coast. It had been in regular use between Safaga and Jeddah, in Saudi Arabia. According to press reports, nearly 300 of the 678 people aboard were Muslim pilgrims returning from a visit to Mecca, Islam's most holy shrine. In *Prophecy Today* for September/ October we published a list of accidents and misfortunes that have befallen Islam in recent years. They included most recently the crash with the loss of all 261 lives of a DC-8 airliner at Jeddah, returning to Nigeria after last year's Hajj celebrations, and the stampede by pilgrims in a tunnel during the 1990/1410 Hajj in which 1, 426 were crushed to death." Conversely, from within the Muslim community Colonel Gaddafi announced that the earthquake which devastated the town of Kobe in Japan in 1995/1415 was divine punishment for Japan's links with the United States.

- 10 On Jonestown, see T.Robbins "Religious mass suicide before Jonestown: the Russian old believers" (which draws some interesting parallels with earlier examples of Christian mass suicide) in *Sociological analysis*, 47 (1986), pp 1–20, and on the Pakistani incident see A.S.Ahmed "Death in Islam: the Hawkes Bay case" in *Man*, 21 (1986), pp 120–135.
- 11 A small practical illustration of this may be seen in the reaction of some Christians when they hear that Muslims in Britain do not always celebrate the main festivals of the Muslim calendar on the same date. This is because the festival at the end of the month of fasting, in particular, is dependant on the new moon being seen (which indicates the start of the next month), but some British Muslims follow Mecca, some follow the practice of their ancestral home-country, and some follow Morocco (the nearest Muslim majority society to Britain). The 'd may therefore be celebrated on different days by different parts of the Muslim community, and this is sometimes greeted with incredulity by Christians who forget that Christians too use different calendars, with Eastern and Western Christians mostly celebrating Christmas on December 25th and January 6th respectively, and sometimes celebrating Easter on dates which may be as much as five weeks apart. See further [Chapter Five](#) below on this.
- 12 Something similar also sometimes occurs with reference to the earlier history of the two communities, especially on the question of change. Is change seen as development, in other words a perfectly legitimate change within the acceptable boundaries of a religious tradition, or is it rather seen as corruption, or deviation from the authentic foundations of the tradition? Some writers, both Christian and Muslim, identify change in their own community as development but change in the other community as corruption. See [Chapter Three](#) below for further elaboration of this point.
- 13 See J.Hick and B.Hebblethwaite (eds.) *Christianity and other religions*, Fount,1980,p91.

- 14 For Akhtar's work see especially *Light in the Enlightenment: Christianity and the secular heritage*, Grey Seal, 1990. On Pfander see A.A.Powell *Muslims and missionaries in pre-Mutiny India*, Curzon Press, 1993, especially Chapters Five and Eight.
- 15 SCM, 1976.
- 16 *An Open Letter to the Pope*, produced in Egypt in 1978, specifically asked His Holiness to put a stop to this kind of thing!
- 17 Oxford U.P., 1977.
- 18 It has to be admitted that these two works may not be altogether comparable, since Hick's discussion of the Incarnation is that of an "insider" to the Christian community, whereas the opinions of Cook and Crone are those of "outsiders" to the Muslim community, but the question of the differing uses to which the arguments of radical critical scholarship are put is still a legitimate one. See [Chapter Eight](#) below for further discussion of this point.
- 19 On the (so-called) Gospel of Barnabas, see J. Slomp "The Gospel in dispute" in *Islamochristiana*, 4 (1978), pp 67–112, and for a convenient summary of the incident of the "Satanic verses" see W.M.Watt *Muhammad: prophet and statesman*, Oxford U.P., 1961, pp 60–65.
- 20 Thus according to a Christian view of this kind Christians love one another and pray for those who persecute them, while Muslims are violent in their use of terrorism, oppressive in their attitudes towards women, and totalitarian in their attitude towards dissent, and according to a Muslim view, all Muslims are members of one community which is completely unanimous over every detail of belief and practice and is completely devoid of any element of disagreement, while Christians are godless immoral imperialists, disseminating drug-abuse, sexual immorality and HIV across the whole globe.
- 21 The difficulty of interpreting a faith other than one's own is clearly outlined by Michael Pye in his "Religion: shape and shadow" in *Numen*, 41 (1994), pp 51–75, where he indicates how easy it is to read other religious systems in the light of the assumptions of another religious system, thus producing a picture which is not recognised by the members of the tradition which is under examination.
- 22 Kenneth Cragg, in his recent book *To meet and to greet*, Epworth, 1992, has a pleasing way of describing the attitude which should be avoided. He writes: "If we are to meet, we must come out of Adamant Square and leave Cavil Row behind" (p 26), these places being the abodes of the habits of "impregnable hardness" and "finding fault unfairly" respectively.
- 23 The approach here builds on the work of two important figures within the general field of Religious Studies, John Bowker and Ninian Smart. The former is significant for his analysis of religion and of religious traditions as systems, using the analogy of information systems, originally in the

1981 report of the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, *Believing in the Church* (SPCK, 1981), and later reprinted as an Appendix in his *Licensed Insanities* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987). This can sometimes make it seem as if God is the great computer, or perhaps the great database, in the sky, but it does have many strengths. And the latter is significant for his scheme of the different dimensions of religion, a scheme which is now known throughout the world of religious education, right down to primary schools. Originally, as in *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (Collins, 1971), there were six dimensions, the ritual, the mythological, the doctrinal, the ethical, the social and the experiential, though it is interesting to note that in Smart's latest volume, the lavishly illustrated *The World's Religions* (Cambridge U.P., 1989), the number of dimensions has increased to seven, via the addition of the iconographical.

- 24 Two influential pioneers of this kind of approach are Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Clifford Geertz. The former, in his *The meaning and end of religion*, Macmillan, 1962, outlines the view that religious traditions consist of two elements, that of faith, which is an existential attitude of trust and which broadly speaking is not dissimilar in different religious traditions or in different times and places, and that of what Smith calls the "cumulative tradition", the various expressions of faith which are worked out in terms of both beliefs and practices and which do vary between traditions and develop over the course of time. The latter, working as an anthropologist, analyses cultures as language-systems, which make perfect sense to those who know and make use of them but are opaque and even incomprehensible to those who do not know them until they have made some effort to learn the language and make some effort to interpret what they observe. For a general outline of this view see his "Religion as a cultural system" in *The interpretation of cultures*, Basic Books, New York, 1973, and for an example of his work on Islam in particular see *Islam observed*, University of Chicago Press, 1968. A Christian theologian who has made use of this insight in seeking to examine the relationship between the Christian faith and other faiths is George Lindbeck; see his *The nature of doctrine: religion and theology in a postliberal age*, SPCK, 1984. One of the great strengths of this whole approach is that it permits a clear analysis of the means by which religious traditions change and develop, and thus of how they sift their resources in order to re-formulate themselves. With reference to the Christian tradition this is clearly acknowledged in T.S.Eliot's famous remark: "Christianity is always changing into something that can be believed". For an interesting study of how Christianity has evolved over the course of the centuries see D.E.Nineham *Christianity mediaeval and modern: a study in religious change*, SCM, 1993.

- 25 The reaction of many colleagues at the seminars at which I presented an outline of the book was “how many volumes are you thinking of?” Encouragement was provided, however, by the recent publication of a number of books attempting a similar comparison of different traditions in the series “Themes in Comparative Religion”. See, for example J.Brockington *Hinduism and Christianity*, Macmillan, 1992 and J.Ching *Chinese religions*, Macmillan, 1993, which despite the lack of any reference to Christianity in the title, does contain comparative discussions, which are more fully developed in her *Christianity and Chinese religions*, written jointly with Hans Küng, and published by SCM in 1994.
- 26 For the same reason books referred to in foot-notes and the Bibliography are, unless otherwise stated, published in London.
- 27 Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.