

# Islam: a challenge to Christianity



Islam appears to be forever in the news. Islamic issues and Muslim politics feature in the media more often than not. And Islam is felt by many Christians to pose something of a threatening challenge. Or at least this seems to be the case. But why should this be so? In what ways might Islam be a challenge to Christianity? To arrive at some sort of answer, and to gain a perspective on the apparent rising dominance of things Islamic, we need to understand something of where Islam comes from and how it sees itself. The challenge of Islam to Christianity is undeniably the challenge of confronting the reality of Islam itself, for which understanding is the first step. Once we have addressed that, we can look at some of the more specific challenges posed by Islam, and explore something of how Christians might respond.

## Ancient beginnings

As a major religion of the world, Islam is relatively recent. But it traces its origins to ancient beginnings. For, in Islamic thinking, this religion really began with the great Semitic patriarch, Abraham. Some would even say it began with Adam as the first created human being. Nevertheless, historically speaking the religion of Islam began early in the seventh century of the Common Era (CE) with the Arabian prophet, Muhammad. In 610 he experienced a call to be God's mouthpiece; to be the bearer of God's message to the people of Mecca and the Arab peoples more generally. By 622 he had formalised the structure of Islamic community – the *Ummah* – at the town of Yathrib, renamed "Medina" (short for the Arabic "City of the Prophet"). Muhammad died in

632.

The word "Islam" means, in essence, "being in peaceful submission" to Allah (the Arabic for "God"). A Muslim is one who lives life in submission to the will of God. In Islamic thought, all human beings are born innately *muslim* – that is, all are born according to, and innately in submission to, the will of God (Allah), the Creator.

The ancient patriarch, Abraham,

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who lived some 2000 years before Christ, provides the originating model of what it means to be "muslim". For, in complete submission to the command of God, he prepared his first-born son for sacrifice. However, at the point where the sacrificial act was to be concluded, God intervened. He declared Abraham's perfect submission to be well demonstrated and directed him to a nearby ram which Abraham then offered as the sacrifice in the place of his son.

Muslims still commemorate this event of absolute submission – and God's gracious response of providing the substitution – with the annual festival of Eid-al-Adha. This takes place during the month of the Hajj and likewise involves the sacrifice of a substitutionary beast.

The story of Abraham's testing as recorded in the Bible (Gen 22) names the son as Isaac, from whom are descended the Hebrew tribes and thus eventually the religion of Judaism. But Abraham had another son, Ishmael, older than Isaac, but not of the same mother. In Islamic thought it is the first-born Ishmael whom Abraham had readied for the

sacrificial offering. In the biblical record, Ishmael and his mother Hagar were exiled from the land of Abraham soon after Isaac was born. They fled to the deserts of Arabia, thus the Arab tribes are descended from Ishmael and, in time, the religion of Islam.

So, from Abraham there comes a common thread binding Jews, Muslims, and also Christians,

together. Abraham is the patriarch not just of an ancient Near Eastern people; from him can be traced three great world religions. For Jews, he demonstrates fidelity to Torah, the commanded way of God. To Christians, he demonstrates sublime faith, the wholehearted obedience to God. To Muslims, he demonstrates perfect submission to the will of Allah, the one and only God. But if Abraham is the common link point, the subtle variations in ways of referring to him reflect nuanced differences in religious perspective. And to understand the Islamic one, we need to turn to Muhammad, born towards the end of the sixth century of the Common Era, more than 2500 years after Abraham.

## Muhammad

Muhammad grew up in a relatively poor tribe that lived in the town of Mecca on the Arabian peninsula. This town had developed through many centuries around the Ka'ba, an ancient stone building – a cube-like structure – which it was believed Abraham had built to honour God when he paid a visit to his son Ishmael. However, by the beginning

of the 7<sup>th</sup> century it housed the effigies and symbols of many deities. For by this time Arabia had forgotten its ancient *muslim* beginnings. Belief in, let alone the way of submission to, the one and only creator God had long been eclipsed by a fanciful polyglot spirituality. To be sure, in Arabic lore there was reference to a high God, “al-lah” – “the (al) deity (lah)” – a remote Supreme Being. But tribal diversity and rivalry was reflected in polytheistic variety. The Arabs worshipped many gods.

For centuries there had been a custom of making an annual visit to Mecca – to visit the shrine, pay respects to your deity, and pay a fee to the Meccans for that privilege, engage in trade, and

generally have a good time. Long before Muhammad, the month of the Hajj had been an annual “field-days-cum-trade-fair” time of year with all the associated social

activities and commercial dynamics. It provided much of the economic life-blood of Mecca, under-girding its stability as an urban centre within an otherwise largely nomadic culture.

As a young man, Muhammad was employed on trade caravans that plied the region. This led him to come into contact with clans of Jews and communities of Christians who, by this time, had moved into the Arabian Peninsula and its immediate environs. Muhammad learned afresh of the belief in the One God, worshipped by both Jews and Christians. He heard about the prophets to the Jews since the time of Abraham. He found out about Jesus who, for some of these Christians – mostly non-Chalcedonian exiles regarded as heterodox by the then orthodox (Chalcedonian) Christians – was seen as another prophet, even if a somewhat special one. For others, however, Jesus was believed to be, quite literally, the Son of God; although orthodox theology of the day was hardly literal in the way that is often the case today. Chalcedonian Christology and

orthodox Trinitarian conceptuality are nothing if not metaphysically nuanced.

Jews and Christians both talked about a day of judgement; a day when God would call all to account and determine a final outcome for each – the rewards of heaven or the punishments of hell. It was this motif which, in particular, would come to play a significant part in Muhammad’s theology and in the subsequent development of Islamic orthodoxy.

In the course of time Muhammad married the wealthy widow, Khadija, who had employed him as a young man. He was then 25 years old. They raised a family, although

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all their sons died in infancy. Only one child of the marriage, his daughter Fatima, survived Muhammad.

By the age of 40, Muhammad was in the custom of taking regular time out in prayer and meditation in a cave not far from Mecca. It was on one such occasion that a significant event – his calling to be a prophet – occurred. The one true God, according to both Christians and Jews, could not be represented by any image but only by prophetic leaders. Muhammad knew that such prophets had in previous times appeared in Palestine. In Persia, also, there had been just such a prophet – Zoroaster. So who would come to Arabia to give God’s warning? Surely God would send a prophet to the Arab peoples? It was in a context of reflective meditation that Muhammad received a vision of an angelic being, named as the Archangel Jibreel (Gabriel).

This heavenly messenger commanded Muhammad to recite. The Arabic for the imperative “recite” is *iqr’a* from which is derived the word *Qur’an*, denoting

the collection of these divinely given recitations. Muhammad was informed that God himself would provide the words: Muhammad simply had to submit to the will of God and allow Allah to speak his message through him.

For Islam it is important that Muhammad’s submission, humility, and relative illiteracy are acknowledged. In no way could a human being invent or create the recitations, which have since been collected and reproduced in book-form, the *Holy Qur’an*. Throughout the Muslim world, the primary way of accessing the sacred text has ever been through the medium of listening to chanted recitation. And

the greatest prize is to be able to chant it oneself by heart.

**The early years of Islam**

So, the religion of Islam begins with the prophet Muhammad but

traces its heritage to the beginnings of the biblical period. What happened in the early years of Islam around the time of Muhammad? What were the distinctive features and factors that gave Islam its shape, and which has lasted even to the present day?

In the decade immediately following his call and the commencement of the recitations, Muhammad both repeated the recitations as they occurred, and also preached or spoke on them. Initially he stressed the warning to fellow Arabs to give up their idolatrous ways, to repent of their harsh customary practices such as the “exposure” (that is, leaving out in the desert to die) of unwanted infant daughters. He also exhorted them to worship and submit to the one true God, the ruler and judge of all. This meant giving up all the false gods whose representations populated the Ka’ba – and formed part of the magnetic attraction of the annual hajj.

Needless to say, this didn’t go down well. The Meccan commercial community did not take kindly to

one of their own using religion to undermine the free-market opportunism that was embedded in age-old social practices. Indeed, apart from winning a few converts, the first years were harsh on Muhammad. He experienced much rejection and vilification from his own people. Significantly it was his uncle, Abu Talib – who never converted to Islam but remained all his life a pagan – who was one of Muhammad’s key supporters. Abu Talib represents the perspective of someone who disagrees with you, but defends your right to be true to yourself, even if that means being radically different or “other”. Muhammad’s first staunch supporter was his wife, to whom he remained monogamously faithful throughout her life.

The support of these two people in his early years was critical, as was the support offered by the Christians of

Abyssinia (Ethiopia), who offered Muhammad and the nascent Muslim community shelter when Meccan opposition proved particularly tough. Together, these three factors that lie at the foundation of Islam are important to be aware of. They need to be remembered by Muslims and Christians alike, especially today. For they offer a point of reference in terms of finding a way forward in contemporary Christian–Muslim relations.

That is to say, at the commencement of Islam it was a situation of religious plurality conjoined with mutual respect that enabled the grace of God to be at work: pagan non-believer and Christian other-believer, as well as the committed Muslim believer, all co-operatively contributed to the development of Islam in its time of gestation. Indeed, in the centuries of great dynastic development and spread of Islam it was often the co-religionists of the Muslims – the Jews and the Christians – whose

skill and acumen were employed in the machinery of government.

In the year 620, Muhammad was approached by the leaders of another town, Yathrib, about 300 miles to the north of Mecca, with the offer of what we might call an employment contract. They wanted him to assume full political, judicial, and military leadership, as well as exercising religious leadership – he was, after all, the Prophet of God to the Arabs; later he would be recognised as the final prophet, or the “Seal” of prophets and of prophecy as such. As God had spoken fully and succinctly through Muhammad, delivering thereby his pure and complete message to

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humankind, there would be no need of further divine revelation. But at this stage, a bare decade into Muhammad’s prophethood, things were still in a state of flux and development. As with the support of his uncle and wife, so the opportunity afforded by the town of Yathrib was a vital factor in the establishment and eventual success of Islam.

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Arrangements were not concluded overnight, so it was not until the middle of 622 that Muhammad finally left Mecca for this town, which was then renamed “Medina al Nabi” – the city of the Prophet. It is known simply as “Medina” for short. This migration, or *al-Hijra*, of the Prophet and his people to Medina is a critical event for Islam. It signals the beginning of the Islamic

calendar, for it marks the beginning of the Islamic community as an identifiable religio-political entity.

Just as Christians have a concept of a single and united community, expressed by such terms as “body of Christ” or “Church” (*ecclesia*), so Muslims have the word *Ummah* which refers to the community initially forged at Medina. It now refers to the notion of there being one community of Muslim believers throughout the world, united under God. As a concept it is often invoked to promote an ideal, even if the reality is far more fractured. Christianity and Islam share an ideology of oneness, and a history of division.

At Medina, Muhammad laid down the basis for Islamic religious belief and practice – belief in the oneness of God, and in himself as the last of God’s prophets; the disciplined practice of prayer five times per day;

the dawn to dusk daily fast during the lunar month of Ramadan; the paying of an annual charity tax for support of the poor and needy; and eventually the re-establishment of the *Hajj* as the annual great pilgrimage to Mecca, to be enjoined upon all Muslims at least once in their lifetime – health and wealth, and nowadays also Saudi quotas and visas, permitting.

At first, the Islamic community at Medina was at odds with the Meccans. A series of battles ensued, but as Muhammad’s Islamic forces grew in strength – many Arab tribes eventually joined his cause and converted to this faith – the Meccans, in the end, surrendered in peace in the year 630. At this juncture Muhammad did two things, both of which are paradigmatic for Islamic ideology. First, he magnanimously embraced the defeated Meccans, offering mercy and incorporation instead of execution or exile, thus establishing a Muslim value on showing mercy.

Second, he “islamised” the

Ka'ba. That is to say, he cleansed it of its idols and false associations and restored it to its primordial purpose of a place in which God is honoured. This was an important action for two reasons. On the one hand, it demonstrated the triumph of the belief in and the religion of the one true God over all rival idolatries. On the other hand, it provides an insight into the essential dynamics of Islam: the religion of submission has cause to ensure or enforce this submission in certain circumstances. Muhammad's actions of excising the false and re-asserting the proper and appropriate submission to God would ever inform Muslim sensibility and polity.

At the commencement of the Muslim community the direction of prayer was not Mecca but Jerusalem. Here may be found the patch of rock upon which, tradition has held, Abraham had made his sacrifice. And, according to a legendary item recorded within the Qur'an, in the course of his meditations one night Muhammad was miraculously transported to this rock to pray with Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Then he was further miraculously transported to heaven where he conversed with God about his mission. He was also shown the realities of paradise and hell. The point of this story, whether viewed symbolically or read literally, is to underscore religious connections and relativities: Muhammad is a full member of this "club" of religious leaders. The story also reinforces Muhammad's basic message: submit to Allah in the fear of damnation if you do not, and the promise of paradise and reward if you do.

By the time of the capture of Mecca, however, the direction of prayer had been changed so that Abraham's shrine, the Ka'ba in Mecca, became and has remained ever since the liturgical focal point of Muslim prayer. Then, just two years

after the triumph at Mecca, Muhammad himself fulfilled the ritual performance of the Hajj, returned to Medina, and soon afterwards he died.

#### Division within Islam

In its tenth year (632CE) the Islamic community faced a crisis of leadership: who was to succeed the Prophet? Some felt he would return from death and come again to lead them – echoes of Christian sentiments about their Christ. Others felt he was not really dead: God had taken him directly into heaven – echoes of some Jewish views about prophets such as Elijah. In the event, the view that Muhammad was

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merely a man, a prophet charged with a divine task but now gone the way of all mortal flesh, triumphed. It was God who would prevail, not a man, however exalted he might be.

Muhammad's right-hand-man, Abu Bakr, was elected his successor. He became the first Muslim Caliph. There then followed a succession of Caliphs, the fourth of whom was Ali, a relative of Muhammad who had become his son-in-law by virtue of marrying his daughter, Fatima. Whereas the majority of Muslims at the time agreed with the principle of consensus whereby the Caliph was elected – these became the Sunni Muslims – another group argued that Muhammad had decreed a dynastic line of succession that should have started with Ali. These became the Shi'a Muslims.

Thus was begun the first major division within Islam, a division that was based not just on a question of succession, but also and importantly on the nature of

leadership of the Muslim community. Muhammad had begun as a prophet of God bringing a message of warning: repent, believe, and obey the one and only God, or suffer the consequences.

Prophethood was his primary vocation, but he ended his life in a complex leadership role. He was, at one and the same time, the political, judicial, and military leader of the Muslim community, as well as its religious leader. But, upon his death, there could be no replacement prophet – he was the last that God would send as far as Muslims were concerned. But certain religious functions, such as leading prayer, had to continue of course; and the other leadership roles he had carried also had to continue.

In developing leadership roles and functions subsequent to Muhammad, Islam embarked upon a functional “secularisation”, inasmuch as leadership roles

other than strictly religious became the focus of the Caliphs. Political, judicial, and military leadership were separated out from religious leadership as such. From here arose a history of interaction and tension between the broadly “political” and the overtly “religious” dimensions of Islam. And the tensions would and could be acute – leading, even down to the present age, to revolutions and overthrows. On the one hand Islam, ideologically, disavows a secular split. Religion and politics are meant to be intertwined because the Muslim community as such lives its life in submission to the will of God. At heart, Islam advocates theocracy.

On the other hand, political leaders would prefer that the religiously pious keep out of politics, and at times will even suppress the religiously-driven opposition, even when – as has been the case in recent times in Algeria and Egypt, for example – it is the religious leadership advocating for

democratic outcomes. The result of this tension is that, even today, there will be signs within the Muslim world of disaffected religious leadership seeking to reform or replace political leadership regarded to be straying from the straight path of leading the community in accord with the will of God. Perhaps the most famous example in recent times was that of Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini.

Within a century or so of the death of Muhammad, the armies of Islam had captured Jerusalem and a Muslim shrine was built over that religiously significant patch of rock. This shrine is the famous Dome of the Rock, which dominates the Jerusalem skyline to this day. It falls within the precincts of the mosque called *al Aqsa*, but is a different building.

For about six centuries, the Islamic empire expanded and was ruled successively by two great dynasties. The first of these (the *Umayyad* Dynasty) was based in Syria, with Damascus as the capital. It had taken over from the initial line of Caliphs who, as with Muhammad, had had their powerbase in Medina. The second (the *Abbasid*) dynasty shifted the powerbase of Islam from Syria to what is now Iraq, with Baghdad as its capital. The Muslim empire soon extended from the south of France, through Spain, across North Africa and encompassed the entire Middle East, sweeping up into south-eastern Europe. It then spread further eastwards into the Indian sub-continent and over into China. The Islamic empire, at its height, covered a territory which dwarfed that of the Roman Empire.

However, in the middle of the thirteenth century Mongol invaders swept through from the East, overran much of the empire and sacked Baghdad. Ironically, however, while the invaders triumphed militarily, they came under the sway of Islamic faith: the

Mongols became Muslim and subsequently gave rise to the Islamic Mogul Empire of the Indian sub-continent. The combination of this inroad into much, though by no means all, of Islamic territory, coupled with inherent political, ethnic, and even religious diversity that was bubbling away, meant that the era of the united Islamic Empire gave way to a succession of kingdoms and caliphates. The most notable, apart from the Indian Mogul, were the Persian (Iranian) Shi'ite Safavid and the Turkish Ottoman empires.

#### **The Ottoman caliphate**

The Ottoman caliphate emerged as one of the more prominent and

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dominating of the empires that followed the era of the great pan-Islamic dynasties. This empire had its powerbase in Turkey and lasted until 1924. It is sobering to recall that, when the ANZACs landed in Gallipoli, the Turks with whom they fought were not just the allies of Germany; they were soldiers of the Islamic empire of the Ottomans. Their repelling of western invaders echoed the skirmishes of the Crusades. And to the extent New Zealanders and Australians annually commemorate the Gallipoli debacle as the genesis of the ANZAC spirit and identity, it is perhaps worth being reminded that this genesis occurred in the context of the long history of fraught Christian-Muslim relations. It was only with the abandonment of the Caliphate that the Turks, under the leadership of Mustapha Kemal (who himself fought the ANZACs), adopted a nationalistic and secular identity, suppressing in the process the predominance of religion in public

life. But the fact remains: our ANZAC identity was born in the context of a variation on the theme of hostile Christian-Muslim engagement. Islam features in our own identity-formation as a nation.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the various Islamic caliphates and kingdoms that had evolved over the centuries had mostly given way to the rise of the modern nation-state. However, in the Middle-East the concept of “kingdom” with its inherent tendency to authoritarian rule still prevails as a kind of overlay. Today Muslims find themselves living in many and varied circumstances, from the minority community in an effectively foreign environment (such as

Muslims in New Zealand), to being members of an Islamic nation (such as Saudi Arabia) where there is no constitution or law other than the Qur'an and the Shari'a (the Islamic exposition of divine law).

The apparent resurgence of Islam in the wider world certainly reflects an element of religious fundamentalism and fanaticism from some quarters. But for the most part Muslims are moderates. The largest Islamic population belongs not to the Middle-East, nor even to the Indian sub-continent, but to the islands of Indonesia. Islam, in that sense, is a close neighbour of New Zealand. To be sure there is a tenor of strictness and discipline that adheres more or less naturally to Islam by virtue of the very nature of the religion. But headline-grabbing excesses are just that – an excess of fervour and zeal rather than an expression of the essence of the religion.

Islam certainly cannot be ignored in the modern world. Worse yet is the response that dismisses or otherwise tries to negate it. Struggle – the essential meaning of Jihad – with unbelief from within and threats to belief from without has steeled this religion through the

centuries. But Islam, the religion of peaceful submission to the God who is all-merciful and all-compassionate, is not so much a religion to be feared as a faith to be understood, a religion inviting dialogue and response. Islam certainly constitutes a challenge. But what, exactly, are the key dimensions of this challenge? And how have Christians responded to it?

### **Rival worldviews and world powers**

Within a century or so of its historical inception, Islam presented to Christianity not simply a rival world religion, but a rival worldview and world power. Islam was first treated by Christians as a heresy, implying that it spoke the same religious language, but that it derived alternate religious conclusions. Yet, in the course of time, many Christians went over to this new faith. North African Christianity, the land of St Augustine and a long-time bastion of western Christian orthodoxy, effectively gave way to the new monotheistic faith. Christianity and Islam have ever been at loggerheads; each vying for supremacy; each believing itself better, or truer, than the other. The history of interreligious encounter between these two faiths has been undeniably fraught, even if punctuated – especially in more recent times – with interactions of genuine goodwill and mutual humility.

One of the critical challenges has ever been that of theological encounter. Much of how Islam and Christianity pronounce and act upon issues and problems, with respect to both worldly and spiritual matters, comes down to an extension of fundamental principles and the application of basic beliefs. This is a potentially vast area to contemplate. What are the kinds of problems that

Christians have with Islam? What might be done about them? What makes it difficult for a Christian to really listen to and hear the Muslim point of view?

Three issues come to mind, among a considerable range that could be addressed. The first has to do with timing: the religion of Islam, as an historical phenomenon, comes after the inception of Christianity. The second has to do with the association of Islam with aggression of one sort or another: is Islam really as violent as recent history seems to portray? The third touches on the theological question of the object of worship and devotion: do Muslims and Christians worship the same or a different God? Behind and within

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each one of these there lies a complex web of issues and assumptions, of course. All that can be undertaken here is simply to sketch out what each is, and indicate some possible responses for further consideration.

#### **The issue of historical timing**

The issue of historical timing of Muhammad’s revelation as a problem from the Christian point of view has to do with the classical assumption that revelation is fixed and that the scripture that conveys revelation, namely the Bible, is closed. It is, of course, a generic problem common to all religions of revelation: the context of early beginnings means that at some point the message sent by God is believed to have been received at or by a certain point in time; therefore there is no need for God to send yet another message or messenger. And the record of this message is deemed to be fixed when the written version was formatted into a canon – in the

case of Christianity, the Holy Bible.

Christians have typically viewed divine revelation to have been effectively concluded with Jesus, and the record to have been completed once the full Bible had been finalised. Therefore the notion that, since these closures, there could be any further substantial and significant revelation given by God, which could result in yet another scripture, seems impossible or at least highly improbable.

Significantly, allied to the issue of timing there is the issue of “supersession” as a stance taken by Islam towards Christianity. For many centuries Christians have believed their revelation and religion superseded that of Jews and

Judaism. The claim of Islam to be a revealed religion may be viewed as a threat to Christianity because of the implication of yet another supersession which, of course, from a traditional Christian point of view, is

impossible. In other words, the timing of Islam is problematic because it does not “fit” into the classical Christian understanding of revelation, and if it does not “fit” then it must be either irrelevant or false.

A further allied issue is “abrogation”. In essence, Muhammad’s recitations are believed to be the complete and final revelation of the word of God – the mother of the Book – against which all previous revealed “books” (of Jews and Christians, for example) are believed to have become distorted and corrupted versions requiring Qur’anic correction. There is an Islamic line of thought which regards the religions and their scriptures that precede Islam, historically, to have been “abrogated” – that is, set aside and replaced by – that which has come in and through Muhammad and the Islamic religious structures he instituted.

What can we make of all this? In

my view, the problem of timing – and so also supercession and abrogation – is eased to the extent that the focus is placed not on the historical moment or period of revelation but on the reality of the one and only God (in Arabic language: *Allah*) who gives the revelation, for revelation is the prerogative of God. Allah is the author of the message. Jesus and Muhammad are different historic personalities, who lived in different times and different situations, and who were – and are still – differently understood; yet they are equally bearers of revelation, equally

and time. Yet always God, and the message of God, is eternal.

The issue of timing is a matter of variations in the delivery of the divine message, or the experience of revelatory encounter with the divine, to specific people in particular historical contexts. Differences in historical timing do not necessarily mean one is true and the other false, or that one is better than the other, or that the earlier is superseded by the latter. Timing is determined by God. It is our duty to hear the message that transcends all time, and to respond to and live by it in our own time.

similar charge or critique, when considered historically. Peace and love; compassion, mercy and forgiveness are values espoused by both faiths because the source of such values lies in the revelation of the same God who has spoken through each. Nevertheless, at the present time, the association of Islam with acts of violence is indubitable, although it is by no means an absolute or universal element of this religion. There are plenty of genuinely peace-loving Muslims who eschew the ways of violent extremism. The contemporary

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messengers of God. The respective scriptures that followed upon the completion of their work bear the stamp of human endeavour inasmuch as they contain within them the divine revelation that was conveyed. That is why in both Islam and Christianity there has always been a great tradition of commentary and exposition.

The source of revelation is universal, but the specific revelations mediated through the respective historic persons and events (of Jesus and Muhammad) are particular to their context of culture, moment, and language, among other things. Christians and Muslims need not argue the point *that* God spoke. We can accept that there is a record appropriate to God's "speaking" in each case. We can, and do – both within and between our respective religions – debate and discuss what God meant and how the meaning of the message is to be understood and applied in our day

#### A closed judgement?

The second issue involves the fact that it seems undeniable that Islam, despite its proclamations of being inherently a religion of peace, is associated with militarism. Both in

violent associations that attach to their faith is as much a problem for them as it is for Christians and others who would seek to live in friendship with their Muslim neighbours.

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Christianity and Islam have each developed within the realities of human communities and historical processes. Religion as such may be distinguishable

its inception at the time of Muhammad, and in its subsequent historical development down to the present day, Islam is perceived by many to be a religion dominated by aggressive military and political action. It appears often to get its way by force; it imposes its viewpoint. It is rigid in its beliefs and inflexible in its social life. At least, this seems to be the received perception. But is it fair? Might this be an instance of a tradition of prejudicial assumption and closed judgement?

Christianity, whose *leitmotif* is love, is not exactly immune from a

from politics, but in the real world political activity and ideals are intertwined with religious sensibilities and principles. Aggression has figured to a greater or lesser degree in the history of both of these religions, like it or not. Furthermore, the nature of Christianity and Islam has meant that each has had a history of close engagement with political authority and power. These are the broad historical facts. To quote the old saying: The pot should not call the kettle black. The perception that Islam is somehow differently

aggressive and has a particular militaristic flavour is just that: a perception, which may be varyingly true in some Muslim contexts, but will be wide of the mark in others. As a broad generalisation it is a limited assessment and, if not countered, leads inexorably to a false assumption or conclusion about Islam as such.

We counter this kind of perception by reference to the wider historical reality that sees religious aggression as not being unique to Islam. We counter misleading perception by noting that in any case aggression is more often the result of political factors, rather than purely religious ones. This applies to both Christianity

and Islam – and also to other religions. And we counter negative perception by a reminder that there are two key words that belong equally to both Islam and Christianity: peace and love. Islam, in a word, is a religion of peace: that is its aim and goal. Likewise we can say Christianity, in a word, is a religion of love. “God is love” and “God so loved the world...” are favourite sayings of Christianity. But equally, these two words – peace and love – apply to each religion. And equally human reality doesn’t always live up to the high ideals embedded in these terms. But that does not detract from the value of the ideals, or the integrity of the religions that espouse them.

### Theological questions

The third and final issue to address is the more overtly theological questions: do Muslims worship a different God from Christians?

Christians talk about God as Trinity; Muslims proclaim the singularity of the one God (Allah). The Christian

are therefore polytheists. There is only one God. There is but one God whom Muslims and Christians

know and encounter differently. The real issue is a matter of difference in conception (our understanding and idea of God) and a difference of experience (our encounter with God, including the fact and nature of revelation).

Muslims and Christians have different experiences of, different history of ideas about, and different points of reference for, the concept and reality of God. But these differences do not necessarily suggest either we are talking about a different God,

**“... two key words that belong equally to both Islam and Christianity: Peace and Love. Islam, in a word, is a religion of peace: that is its aim and goal.”**



idea of Trinity is a way of understanding the reality of the one God, but it is a radically different monotheism from that of Islam. So, despite the theistic commonality, Christians and Muslims can view each other’s faith as very different in terms of the foundational belief in God. Once again, this is a complex issue that can be responded to at a more simple or straightforward level.

For anyone who believes there is no God but God – and this would be as true for a Christian as it is for a Muslim – then it is logically impossible to believe that someone else who believes in God in a way which appears different from me must therefore believe in a completely different God. The underlying problem is that many Christians often falsely assume that Muslims worship a different God, one who is called “Allah”. And many Muslims falsely believe that Christians worship three gods, and

or that one side is completely wrong. Instead, it could be argued that they point more to the greatness, the majesty, the mysteriousness of this God to whom both Christians and Muslims respond in discipleship and worship. After all, God is beyond final or complete human grasp; human thought can never encompass the full being of Allah. So, human difference about God, and the response to God, need not be divisive: it can rather be complementary and mutually enriching.



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