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Christian-Muslim dialogue: a challenge for the new millennium

by Peter Riddell

Introduction

Christian-Muslim relations have been rapidly developing as a field of study in universities and colleges around the world. This has received support from many church groups within liberal, traditionalist and evangelical streams. Indeed, umbrella bodies such as the World Council of Churches have actively encouraged the growth of this field of study.[1] This reflects a growing church interest in other faiths in recent times, especially since the Second World War. Large population movements and migrations in that time have resulted in the creation of genuine multi-faith societies in Western countries. These same societies had previously been, if not monolithically Christian, at least structured such that Christianity was seen as being the default, with minority faiths largely pushed out of sight in terms of public policy and discourse.

Thus in the last fifty years, the churches have of necessity responded by addressing the challenging issue of appropriate Christian attitudes to and methods of engagement with other faiths. Before we follow Church developments in this regard, we need first to paint a brief profile of the Muslim community with which our churches are increasingly interacting.

What kinds of Muslims are there?

Both Christianity and Islam are characterised by great diversity. The following discussion uncovers some of the diversity of Christianity. We therefore need to begin by considering the diversity that constitutes the Muslim world.

A threefold typology is useful, especially in discussing Muslim reactions to the modern world. Such a three-fold categorisation has been articulated recently by several prominent British Muslims. Ataullah Siddiqui of the Islamic Foundation in Leicester writes of a three-fold split between modernists, traditionalists and revivalists.[2] Ishtiaq Ahmed agrees with this typology, further suggesting a proportional allocation by category of a 15%-70%-15% split, according to modernists-traditionalists-revivalists respectively.[3] So we will follow such a three-fold typology, though we will slightly adjust the labels.

Muslim modernisers are concerned with defining faith within a contemporary world context. They follow a method of interpreting the Islamic primary texts to fit the modern context. This leads some down a secularising path, including 'cultural' Muslims and some children of Muslim immigrants born in the West. Many, but not all, Muslim modernisers are based in the West.

Muslim traditionalists emphasise the primacy of the scholarly elite, with congregations trained to acknowledge the wisdom of accumulated traditional authority rather than to participate in a dynamic engagement with the primary sources themselves. In Muslim minority communities in Western countries such as Britain and Australia, Muslim traditionalists tend to be the immigrant generation.

Muslim radical activists use Islamic Scripture as the filter through which all discussion passes. They dream of a past "golden age", when the

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Prophet Muhammad was establishing his community in Medina and when God's law, the *Shari'a*, held sway. Many Muslim youth born in the West of immigrant parents opt for the radical activist paradigm, due to a sense of alienation from the majority culture.

Traditional church attitudes and twentieth century developments

Christian scholars of multi-faith studies, in focussing upon the history of this field of endeavour, have identified a spectrum of attitude, as it were, held by various Christian groups towards non-Christian religions, as follows:

a. An exclusivist position, applying to those who believe that Christianity, and only Christianity, possesses divinely revealed truth and offers a path towards salvation.

b. An inclusivist position: this holds that certain other faiths may include some specific elements of divinely revealed truth, but do not of themselves offer a complete path to salvation. In order to offer this, such religions need to embrace Christ (such religions without Christ represent, at the most, a halfway house).

c. A pluralist approach: adherents of this position tend to lessen the focus upon Christ and increase the primary focus upon God, and allow for other religions to be alternative manifestations of God's truth which offer alternative ways to salvation. Thus Christianity becomes merely one of many paths to a knowledge of God and salvation.

Historically, the Christian churches were associated with the exclusivist position, especially during the first millennium, the Crusades, and the colonial period. However, as the world entered the post-colonial era following the Second World War, there were substantial population movements leading to the growth of large non-Christian minorities in Western countries. This led the various Christian churches to revise previous approaches to multi-faith contact and to devise new policies and strategies in the light of the post-colonial world order.

Some churches have reaffirmed an exclusivist position.

Some churches have reaffirmed an exclusivist position. Many have made a marked move from exclusivism towards inclusivism, and some elements in the churches have moved towards a clearly pluralist position. All have been rent by internal divisions on what has become one of the most controversial subjects in the modern church. I will examine this more closely by looking at three major umbrella groups of Christians: the World Council of Churches, the World Evangelical Fellowship, and the Catholic Church.

The ecumenical approach and the World Council of Churches (WCC)

The WCC was established on 23 August 1948 at its first general assembly in Amsterdam. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the WCC included almost all principal Christian denominations, covering over 400 million Christians, and over 330 churches, denominations, and fellowships. The WCC represents churches in over 100 countries and fellowships. The notable Christian group absent from the WCC is the Roman Catholic Church. Nevertheless the Roman Catholic Church does have observer status at WCC events, and Roman Catholic-WCC contacts are regular.

In 1961 the WCC Commission on World Mission and Evangelism was established, thus setting in place a structure designed to articulate and coordinate WCC activities in an area of major traditional activity by the churches. This Commission held its first meeting in 1963 in Mexico City, and three years later a consultation in Lebanon, attended mostly by Christian representatives based in Muslim countries, agreed to initiate meetings with Muslims. From this point, events moved rapidly. In March 1967 a consultation was held in Kandy, Sri Lanka where a significant statement was issued: 'Dialogue implies a readiness to be changed as well as to influence others . . . The outcome of dialogue is the work of the Spirit'.[4]

Two years later, a Muslim-Christian dialogue under WCC auspices in Cartigny, Switzerland articulated three principal aims of dialogue: first, to achieve greater mutual respect and better understanding; second, to raise questions which lead to deepening and renewal of spirituality; and third, to lead Christians and Muslims to accept and fulfil common practical responsibilities.

In 1971, in recognition of the importance of the dialogue initiatives of the previous decade, the twenty-fourth meeting of the WCC Central Committee at Addis Ababa established a new unit, called 'Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies', simply known as the 'Dialogue Unit'. In a watershed meeting in 1977 in Chiang Mai, Thailand, Guidelines on Dialogue were drawn up. The WCC itself observes that 'These guidelines serve as the basis of inter-religious dialogue sponsored by the WCC and many churches around the world'.[5] Indeed, various local guidelines have been drawn up by various WCC member groups such as the Council of Churches of Britain and Ireland, the Episcopal Church of Canada[6] and the Presbyterian Church (USA),[7] but they closely reflect the 1977 Guidelines of the WCC.

During the 1980s, the WCC gradually changed its focus from the international to the regional level for promoting dialogue activities, and in the early 1990s the Dialogue Unit was closed due to financial constraints. However, its functions did not cease. Rather, it was restructured to become a sub-unit of the WCC Secretariat called the Office of Inter-religious Relations (OIRR).

The WCC invited fifteen guests of other faiths to the 1998 Assembly in Harare. Furthermore, the Assembly asked the Office on Inter-religious Relations to give visibility to 'dialogue and co-operation with people of other faiths'. Thus the WCC has been a pioneer in emphasising inter-faith dialogue; moreover, it has identified dialogue, rather than traditional mission, as the central plank of its multi-faith policy.

WCC guidelines on dialogue

In 1991 the Council of Churches of Britain and Ireland published a local version of the WCC's four principles of dialogue,[8] which were enunciated as follows:

Dialogue begins when people meet each other

Christians are encouraged to focus on individuals, not systems, in this regard. In other words, when meeting a Hindu or a Muslim, Christians should not assume that they match stereotypes of the system of Hinduism or Islam.

Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust

Partners in dialogue should be free to define themselves, in their own terms. Christians should seek to clear away misconceptions held by others about what Christians believe and teach.

Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community

Community depends on the cooperation of all its parts. When the parts consist of people with differing religious faiths, dialogue offers a way towards harmony.

Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness

Dialogue based on trust provides opportunities for all to witness to their faith. It requires that each person be prepared to listen as well as to speak. The CCBI documentation adds that: 'Dialogue assumes the freedom of a person of any faith including the Christian to be convinced by the faith of another'.

Mission, freedom of Religion and the World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF)

The WEF was formed in 1951, and its global network currently comprises 114 national and regional Protestant evangelical church alliances, supplemented by 92 associate member organisations, together representing a constituency of approximately 150 million Christians in 110 nations. The WEF is structured according to various departments — the Church and Society Department, the Leadership Development Department, and the Publications Department — as well as various Commissions: the Commission for Women's Concerns, the Theological Commission, the Youth Commission, the Missions Commission, and the Religious Liberty Commission.

The WCC . . . has identified dialogue, rather than traditional mission, as the central plank of its multi-faith policy.

The Missions Commission of the WEF provides an approach to Christian-Muslim relations more attuned to past practice and still considered a priority by large segments of the Protestant churches. This approach of traditional mission has increasingly been pushed off centre stage in the WCC with its preference for dialogue. Thus, the WEF Missions Commission adds a piece to the contemporary mosaic of Protestantism. The WEF Missions Commission defines its general goals as being to help to initiate regional and national evangelical alliances where they do not exist, and to strengthen existing ones 'in their role of assisting local churches to disciple the nations'.[9]

Dialogue assumes the freedom of a person of any faith including the Christian to be convinced by the faith of another.

The other WEF commission whose role bears directly on Christian-Muslim relations is the Religious Liberty Commission (RLC). The stated purpose of the RLC is crucial for understanding evangelical approaches to relationships with other faiths:

> The purpose of the World Evangelical Fellowship Religious Liberty Commission (RLC) is to promote freedom of religion for all faiths worldwide as defined by Article 18 of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, and in accordance with Scripture. Our aim is to help all people, but especially Protestant Christians, to exercise their faith without oppression or discrimination.[10]

The phrase 'in accordance with Scripture' points to a characteristic feature of evangelical-

ism, namely the degree to which policy represents an outworking from Scripture. Furthermore, the emphasis on Protestant Christians demonstrates the WEF's position of overtly identifying itself as a special interest body. This contrasts with the approach of the WCC, for which a broad based, ever expanding ecumenism is the stated goal. The RLC specifically targets freedom in a number of areas: religious education, public and private worship, sharing of one's faith, and the freedom to change one's faith. The RLC monitors infringements of religious liberty and reports on it on a regular basis via press releases and e-mail notices. Furthermore, the RLC holds an 'International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church' each year in November.

The nature of the work of the RLC means that Muslim locations and authorities, especially where radicals are in power, regularly appear in RLC reports. The common prohibition in Muslim majority countries on non-Muslims sharing their faith with Muslims, and the widely reported discrimination and persecution against Muslim converts to Christianity, mean that RLC comment on practice in Islamic countries is quite robust. Thus the work of the WEF, with regard to both the Missions Commission and the RLC, serves to supplement the differently orientated work of the WCC in Christian-Muslim relations. Though WCC consultations do address subjects such as religious liberty and freedom of religion, the dialogical focus and the mixed faith presence at WCC inter-faith meetings means that some of the more challenging questions and statistics are not articulated in WCC contexts as occurs in WEF contexts.

The Roman Catholic Church

After having taken a traditionally exclusivist attitude to other faiths, and indeed, other Christian denominations during most of its long history, the Roman Catholic Church underwent a revolution at the Second Vatican Council in 1965. Referring specifically to Islam, the Vatican Council II Declaration presented what it describes as five 'authentic elements of Muslim spirituality':

> Upon the Muslims, too, the Church looks with esteem. They adore one God, living and enduring, merciful and all-powerful, Maker of heaven and earth and Speaker to men. They strive to submit wholeheartedly even to His inscrutable decrees, just as did Abraham, with whom the Islamic faith is pleased to associate itself. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honour Mary, His virgin mother; at times they call on her, too, with devotion. In addition they await the Day of Judgment when God will give each man his due after raising him up. Consequently, they prize the moral life, and give worship to God especially through prayer, almsgiving, and fasting.[11]

This statement is significant, as it identifies key areas of Muslim belief that the Roman Catholic Church regarded as consistent with church doctrine.

Nevertheless, Pope Paul VI's encyclical, *Ecclesiam suam*, issued just before the Second Vatican Council on 6 August 1964, indicated clearly that the official Roman Catholic position towards other faiths was inclusivist rather than pluralist, as follows:

> honesty compels us to declare openly our conviction that there is but one true religion, the religion of Christianity. It is our hope that all who seek God and adore Him may come to acknowledge its truth. But we do, nevertheless, recognise and respect the moral and spiritual values of the various non-Christian religions, and we desire to join with them in promoting and defending common ideals of religious liberty, human brotherhood, good culture, social welfare and civil order.[12]

For the decade following the Second Vatican Council and more, the study of mission within the Roman Catholic Church was gradually eclipsed while theologians reassessed traditional Roman Catholic approaches. The Church moved away from exclusivism towards inclusivism, represented by an increasing acceptance of truth claims, and sometimes salvific claims, of non-Roman Christian faiths. Papal encyclicals in the early 1990s contributed to a redefinition of substance of the traditional Roman Catholic view of evangelism. Henceforth, this was to focus on three macro streams: inter-religious dialogue, enculturation/contextualisation and liberation theology.[13]

The Roman Catholic Church has allocated significant resources to building bridges of dialogue with the Muslim world since Vatican II.

The Roman Catholic Church has allocated significant resources to building bridges of dialogue with the Muslim world since Vatican II. Various research centres have been established, with one of the most active and notable being the Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islam (PISAI) in Rome. PISAI is active in both organising inter-faith events and publishing, through its journals *Islamochristiana* and *Encounters*, as well as its prolific output of books published. However, it would be inaccurate to suggest that all Roman Catholic voices have been singing from the same score during the last fifty years. Indeed, Papal statements have at times served to add a critical cutting edge to discussions, ensuring that a lively debate continues within the church about approaches to other faiths.

For example, thirty years after Vatican II, Pope John Paul II made the following comment in 1994:

> the religiosity of Muslims deserves respect. It is impossible not to admire, for example, their fidelity to prayer.
>
> Some of the most beautiful names in the human language are given to God in the Koran, but He is ultimately a God outside of the world, a God who is only Majesty, never Emmanuel, God-with-us . . . There is no room for the Cross and the Resurrection. Jesus is mentioned, but only as a prophet . . . not only the theology but also the anthropology of Islam is very distant from Christianity.[14]

Pope John Paul II's various statements and activities have reflected the diversity within the church on the issue of approaches to other faiths. In March 1995, Pope John Paul II met with the reformist Iranian President Muhammad Khatami who had himself called for closer dialogue and contact between Islam and Christianity. This meeting was to lead to an annual series of Roman Catholic-Iranian dialogues.

Further reflecting the church's commitment to openness but accompanied by robust statements, in 1995 Pope John Paul II issued a forthright call for Muslim majority countries to extend the same respect for religious minority rights as Muslim minorities enjoyed in predominantly Christian countries. This statement was issued to coincide with the opening of the large new mosque in Rome.

Recommendations from the Council of Churches of Britian and Ireland

Areas of co-operation	Recommended action for Christians
Community meeting	Make an effort to meet adherents of other faiths: neighbours, work colleagues, parents of children's school friends
	Contact a local inter-faith group
Clergy action	Christian clergy should provide counselling support to adherents of other faiths in times of crisis
	Clergy should get to know religious leaders of other faith communities personally and involve these leaders in matters pertaining to the whole community
Social action & advocacy	Cooperate in matters of common cause: racial harassment, drug abuse, inadequate housing
	Provide assistance to other faith communities to procure worship facilities, and freedom to observe dress codes, dietary restrictions, etc.
	Address the issue of access to public broadcasting by other faith communities
	Beware of linking Christianity with underlying racist attitudes. Religious argument can be used as a cover for racial prejudice.
Education	Rethink attitudes concerning religious education in schools
	Revise Sunday school materials to eliminate attitudes seemingly critical of other faiths
	Promote studies of world faiths and inter-faith relations at tertiary levels
Worship	Pray for people of other faiths
	Pray with people of other faiths

Case Studies: Muslim-Christian Dialogue in Practice

How do the different Christian groups turn the various paradigm shifts discussed above into actual practice in inter-faith contacts? In addition to discussions held at the level of church leadership, it is important to see how emerging policies have been translated to action at the grassroots level.

One . . . Christian woman described Islamic worship as sombre and Islam as a sad religion on the basis of what she had observed.

The Practice of dialogue recommended by the CCBI

The Council of Churches of Britain and Ireland (CCBI) accompanied its presentation of the four principles of dialogue with a series of practical suggestions as to ways Christians could partner with adherents of other faiths. Areas of co-operation identified were in community meetings, clergy action, social action and advocacy, education, and worship. See table on previous page.

In the United Kingdom, the above recommendations have been used in certain locations for increasing numbers of inter-faith dialogue activities, particularly among the more liberal wings of the various Protestant churches.

Dialogue on religious experience in Birmingham, UK

Another grass-roots dialogue activity published by the WCC relates to a group engaging in dialogue on religious experience at Birmingham in the British Midlands.

Andrew Wingate, an Anglican minister and former missionary in India, initiated a series of dialogue encounters between his parishioners and Muslims in Birmingham.[15] Wingate writes: 'My time in India convinced me that we come to understand other faiths not from books and texts, but from meeting people . . . we meet with people who follow Hinduism or Islam, not with Hinduism and Islam'.[16] Wingate discusses the exclusivist-inclusivist-pluralist paradigm,[17] and concludes that he is an inclusivist.

In order to initiate meetings, Wingate approached the local Islamic Centre in his area of Birmingham to initiate discussions. He received a positive response, which led to the first meeting between about fifteen Christians and Muslims, for which the agreed topic of discussion was 'prayer'. The second dialogue meeting was held at a local mosque. For this meeting, the Christian women and the Muslim women sat apart from the men, in accordance with standard mosque practice. Many of the meetings were held in private homes of members of the dialogue group. The third meeting was held at the home of one of the Muslims. The focus for this session was on joint Scripture readings covering wide-ranging topics. At Christmas time the Christian participants paid a Christmas visit to the homes of Muslim contacts, and shared a meal together. As relationships developed there were increasing possibilities for expression of heartfelt perceptions. For example, on one occasion one of the Christian women described Islamic worship as sombre and Islam as a sad religion on the basis of what she had observed. This led to considerable discussion.

Another meeting was held in Wingate's house. On this occasion the Muslim participants were all men, whereas the Christian group included women. As the dialogue meetings continued, Wingate records that the meetings between women tended to be on a one-to-one basis, in accordance with Muslim wishes. The meeting in Wingate's house centred on the place of Jesus in personal Christian faith. The meeting included personal testimonies by many of the Christians present, though a measure of Christian diversity was recorded on this point, with some Christians less inclined to speak of a personal relationship with Jesus as such.[18] Concluding his work, Wingate ponders key questions that arise regularly from such inter-faith gatherings:

> I am faced with the question whether they are worshipping the same God as me. Intellectually, I know they must be, as there is only one God, and that is a basic tenet of both our faiths. But deep in my heart, can I feel that they are doing so, even though they do not see God in his complete fullness (if I felt they did, then I would be a Muslim)?[19]

Dialogue for conflict resolution: WCC Encounter Youth Exchange project

A dialogue of a different form is the WCC Encounter Youth Exchange Project. This represents an inter-faith initiative of the Anglican Diocese of Chelmsford, England with the Maronite Diocese of Haifa and the Holy Land. The project was launched in September 1998 with an inter-faith meeting in East London, attended by students and staff from King Solomon High School (Jewish), the Ursuline School and Canon Palmer School (Roman Catholic) and Muslim students from Newham College of Further Education, all based in Britain. The aim of the project is stated as seeking

> to promote a better understanding of, and to work towards reconciliation between, Christians, Jews and Muslims by offering young people an opportunity for encounter by way of educational exchange visits between the Holy Land and England.[20]

Thus the purpose is not focused so much upon a deep exchange of respective theological perspectives, but rather a dialogue aimed at conflict resolution through showing the human face of communities in adversarial situations, in the hope that cycles of negative stereotyping will be broken.

In the second Encounter in August 1999, twelve young British people between the ages of sixteen and eighteen (four Christians, four Jews and four Muslims), with an equal balance between boys and girls, travelled to Jerusalem to meet a similarly constituted group for a ten day Encounter. Prior to the Encounters, the respective groups participate in a preparation program involving both cognitive and experiential activities. Both the preparation program and the Encounters include activities focussing on basic principles of dialogue and conflict management techniques. The Encounters also provide time for visits to places of worship and historical interest and for fun. This program is funded by sponsorship and participant resources, and carries the stamp of the WCC as promotional body. This shows another dimension to WCC inter-faith activities, moving beyond the dialogue on religious experience to engaging with some of the most intractable inter-community conflicts.

Dialogue on social issues: faith and society

Dialogue initiatives have not been restricted to WCC-inclined church groups alone. Indeed, evangelical Christian contact with Muslim communities has witnessed an increasing variety of approaches, including dialogue. One of the most significant initiatives in this regard has been the Faith and Society dialogue group in Britain.

In Britain, in recent years there has been an increasing perception among evangelical groups that there are many areas of shared social concern among Muslims and Christians, and that the potential for partnership on these issues was not being addressed through traditional mission approaches. Accordingly, a pilot conference was held at the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity in November 1997, called 'Faith and Power'. This conference included plenary presentations on issues of social concern by Christian and Muslim speakers, followed by meetings of focus groups addressing specific themes. A second conference for the renamed Faith and Society Group was held in October 1998 at the Islamic Foundation in Leicestershire. The theme was 'People of Faith in Britain Today and Tomorrow': 140 people attended with the Christian-Muslim ratio being approximately 60-40.[21]

In October 1999 the Faith and Society dialogue group held its third annual meeting in Birmingham, and attracted around 100 Christians and Muslims, of whom around 80 per cent were Christian.[22] The theme was 'Seeking the Common Good'. An Anglican Bishop delivered a plenary presentation on behalf of Christian participants. He called on the audience to learn to tell their respective stories in 'an inclusive way'. He lamented the state of economic imbalance in the world and called on people of faith to overcome jointly 'the idolatry of economic concerns' in the modern world. A leading British Muslim figure responded, setting his plenary presentation firmly within an Islamic theological framework. He argued that the notion of the 'common good' was heavily embedded within the vocabulary of the Qur'an, and the five pillars of Islamic duty were an effective device for encouraging Muslims to build concern for others into their daily lives. He called on people of faith to work together to increase the public role of religion. Both speakers agreed that dialogue did not demand complete compromise, and that different faiths involved in inter-faith co-operation should take care to preserve their distinctive features and beliefs.

Dialogue [does] not demand complete compromise . . . different faiths . . . beliefs.

During the afternoon, participants broke into five focus groups, addressing a range of social issues: the media; family, sexuality and gender; religion and public life; education; and law. The media group based its discussion around the question of 'How to get God in the headlines'. Members agreed to seek to identify people of faith in the media who could assist to increase the public profile of religion. The group discussing family, sexuality and gender considered a practical case study of family breakdown, and underlined the importance of support and education in the early stages of family formation. In a similar vein, the religion and public life group considered several practical case studies, showing co-operation between Christians and Muslims in various British cities. The education group initiated plans for visits to mutual places of worship by Christians and Muslims. The Law group addressed the different philosophical bases to English and Islamic Law, and considered the challenge ahead with the advent of European laws in Britain.

Thus 'Faith and Society' provides an example of how evangelical Christian approaches to other faiths have diversified beyond traditional mission activities. In its first three years 'Faith and

Society' has facilitated significant and continuing contacts between evangelicals and Muslims in Britain.

Christian-Muslim debate

Preceding discussion has focussed upon a range of dialogue activities, undertaken by wide-ranging Christian groups. It is noticeable that such dialogue activities produce positive Muslim interest and engagement from two of the three Muslim categories discussed at the outset of this present paper: namely traditionalist and modernising Muslims. On the Christian side, participation in dialogue has been seen to come from liberal, traditionalist and evangelical wings of the churches.

On the Christian side, participation in dialogue has been seen to come from liberal, traditionalist and evangelical wings of the churches.

There is one Muslim voice which has not yet been heard; namely, that of radical Islamist activists who, according to Ishtiaq Ahmed, represent fifteen per cent of Muslims in Britain. Where do they fit into Christian-Muslim relations? Do they have a part to play in increasing Christian-Muslim dialogue activities?

Muslim radicals in Western countries have been posing a unique set of challenges to the Christian faith. Islamic student groups on university campuses in western universities have been engaging in increasing levels of anti-Christian polemic, as part of their mission (*da'wa*) activities. They have been distributing material written by such famous Muslim polemicists as Ahmed Deedat, in their effort to pose searching challenges about the reliability of the biblical materials. A relatively benign example of such anti-Christian polemic is the following:

> The gradual realisation of the distortions present in a number of their holy books is bound to lead the Christians, sooner or later, to admit to the truth of the fact that the greater part of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures has undergone great changes and distortions.
>
> We have shown that the Christians do not possess any authentic records or acceptable arguments for the authenticity of the books of either the Old Testament or the New Testament.[23]

Most Christian groups engaged in multi-faith contacts, whether liberal, traditionalist or evangelical have ignored such challenges. However, some evangelical groups are responding by accepting challenges to public debates, following a practice used in earlier periods by Christian missionaries such as Karl Pfander.

These kinds of public debates are increasingly popular on British university campuses. They are typically organised by student Islamic societies, and are designed around a strictly enforced structure. Such debates attract large numbers. For example, a debate organised by the Manchester University Islamic Society and the Christian Union on 19 April 1997 attracted five hundred people, filling the hall to capacity and disappointing many would-be attenders who were not able to enter the hall. The Christian speaker was Jay Smith,[24] a prominent debater on Christian-Muslim topics in Britain and the United States. Muslim arguments were articulated by Shabir Ali, a leading debater from the Da'wah Centre, Canada. Three topics were discussed: 'Similarities and Differences between Islam and Christianity'; 'The Nature of Sin'; and, 'What does Islam or Christianity have to offer the campus?' Each speaker spoke without interruption for ten minutes, then each was given five minutes to respond to the other. Questions were then received from the floor, with the Chairman enforcing the strict rules of discussion and debate.

This approach tends to be more apologetic and polemical in methodology than dialogical. This method is highly controversial, attracting much opposition from within Christian circles, including evangelical opposition.[25] However, it also attracts considerable support. At the time of writing, the debate methodology stands alone among Christian approaches to Islam which specifically address anti-Christian polemic from radical Muslim groups.

Catholic-Muslim dialogue in Australia

Dialogue between Catholics and Muslims has become increasingly frequent at the grass-roots level around the world during the last quarter of the twentieth century. In Sydney, St Columban's Mission Society established the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations in Turramurra in mid-1990s. Explaining the motivation for establishing the Centre, staff write:

> The Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations contributes to the ongoing work of building better relations between the two faith communities in Sydney and beyond . . . We know people have experienced God in so many ways and have experienced the spiritual dimension of the human within many different cultural and symbolic systems.

This statement clearly embodies the movement towards inclusivism of Roman Catholic policy. Official endorsement of the work of the Centre came in July 1997, when Cardinal Arinze, head of the Pontifical Commission for Inter-Faith Relations, visited the Columban Centre and addressed a group of one hundred people who represented some fourteen different faiths and denominations. Emphasising the centrality of dialogue to Roman Catholic policy, and reminding readers of church authority, a statement on the Cardinal's address by staff of the Columban Centre said: 'A clear message [of the address] is that anyone who is not in favour of inter-faith relations is singing outside the choir of the church'.[26]

The Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations undertakes a range of activities. It organises conferences and meetings between Christians and Muslims to discuss respective beliefs and practices. It maintains a library and resource centre on Islam and Inter-religious Dialogue. It organises in-service/inset sessions for teachers, seminars and workshops on Islam for Christians, visits to mosques, and other relevant activities. The Centre co-ordinates a network of women who wish to develop stronger contacts with Muslim women. And finally, the Centre publishes a newsletter, called *Bridges*, informing others of activities and advertising events.

Nuns working full-time at the Centre formed the Columban Centre women's dialogue network in 1997. Liaison with the Muslim community mainly takes place in the western suburbs of Sydney, around the large Muslim community in Auburn. Christian members of the women's dialogue network visit mosques, invite Muslim speakers to talk to their group, and study about Islam. The women's dialogue network has established links with the Muslim Women's National Network of Australia. Both groups attend each other's functions. For example, on 25 October 1998 five Catholic women from the Columban Centre's women's dialogue network attended the Annual National Seminar of the Muslim Women's National Network of Australia. The topic of the seminar was 'Issues of Concern to Muslim Women'. Writing of the experience, Sister Pauline Rae, Head of the Columban Centre, observes: 'We are women of faith, worshipping the One God and acknowledging the essential element of prayer in our lives'.

Thus Roman Catholic clergy and parishioners in diverse parts of the world have been working to implement Vatican policy regarding attitudes to other faiths in recent decades. The dialogue approach is integrated, including both dialogue on religious experience and dialogue on social concerns.

Conclusions

Objectives of inter-faith dialogue

Four principal objectives of dialogue between Christians and Muslims can be identified from our examination of practical case studies:

- *Mutual understanding.* Dialoguing about faith and cultural differences facilitates mutual understanding. Human history has witnessed many conflicts resulting from ignorance between communities that may have been avoided if there had been a greater degree of mutual knowledge and understanding.
- *Understanding God.* Dialogue should provide an opportunity for participants to advance in their knowledge of God and of his plan of salvation for all humanity. In this context, dialoguing on religious experience has a particular part to play.
- *Witnessing.* Inter-faith dialogue should provide the participants with a forum to express their faith. Both Christianity and Islam consider speaking about one's beliefs and passing on these beliefs to others, or witnessing, as a significant and integral part of faith. Dialogue should take this fact into account and provide a forum for such witnessing to occur. Again, open and frank dialoguing on religious experience is relevant in this context.
- *Co-operation in relevant areas.* Dialogue should also provide some benefit to all parties involved. A fruitful dialogue between Christianity and Islam will provide the basis for joint activities for the advantage of all concerned. A particular case concerns humanitarian relief and development activities. Like Christianity, Islam teaches the importance of helping the poor and underprivileged, the orphaned and other disadvantaged groups. This shared concern should be explored to determine possible areas for co-operation. In this case, dialoguing on matters of social concern is particularly relevant.

None of the above . . . needs to entail compromising the central tenets of one's faith.

None of the above objectives needs to entail compromising the central tenets of one's faith. This is something on which Christians and Muslims can and do agree, as seen in discussion of the October 1999 Faith and Society meeting referred to previously. As Pratt has perceptively

observed, 'the first and primary goal of dialogue is understanding, not agreement'.[27]

Modes of dialogue

Previous discussion, including the examination of selected case studies, points to a wide variety of approaches to Christian-Muslim interaction. Some Christian groups identify three types of dialogue: discursive dialogue, dialogue on religious experience, and secular dialogue, perhaps referred to more accurately as dialogue on social concerns.[28] In addition to these three, we could add traditional mission (by both Christians and Muslims) as a mode of interaction, campaigns on advocacy and justice, and apologetics in the form of debate.

Our examination of church policy and practice suggests that different Christian groups share certain methods but specific groups avoid some modes of interaction. Indeed, the method chosen will be largely determined by the kinds of Christians and Muslims involved in the interaction. This can be tabulated as follows, with the numbering system reflecting the broad priority given by each Christian group to the respective mode of interaction:

Several important observations can be drawn from the below diagram:

- The World Council of Churches, predominantly representing liberals and traditionalists in its Protestant segments, tends to engage primarily with Muslim modernisers and traditionalists, preferring to ignore Muslim radical activists.
- The WCC prefers the modes of dialoguing on religious experience and social concerns, with a lessening emphasis on campaigning for advocacy and justice, and a disavowal of apologetics and debate.
- The profile of Roman Catholic Church preferences resembles that of the WCC. However, previous discussion showed that at times the Roman Catholic leadership has issued robust statements on advocacy and justice issues of a type unlikely to be heard with such force from WCC leaders. The Roman Catholic Church, like WCC members, avoids the debate mode of interaction.
- Christian evangelicals, grouped under the WEF, maintain the priority of traditional mission as well as advocacy and justice issues. Nevertheless, there is an increasing evangelical participation in dialoguing on religious experience and social concerns.

Modes of Christian-Muslim interaction

	Muslim modernisers	Muslim traditionalists	Muslim radical activists
World Council of Churches	1. Dialogue on religious experience 2. Dialogue on social concerns 3. Campaigns on advocacy and justice	1. Dialogue on religious experience 2. Dialogue on social concerns 3. Campaigns on advocacy and justice	
Christian evangelicals	1. Traditional mission 2. Campaigns on advocacy and justice 3. Dialogue on social concerns 4. Dialogue on religious experience	1. Traditional mission 2. Campaigns on advocacy and justice 3. Dialogue on social concerns 4. Dialogue on religious experience	1. Traditional mission 2. Campaigns on advocacy and justice 3. Debate/apologetics
Roman Catholic Church	1. Dialogue on religious experience 2. Dialogue on social concerns 3. Campaigns on advocacy and justice	1. Dialogue on religious experience 2. Dialogue on social concerns 3. Campaigns on advocacy and justice	

Furthermore, the only Christian group to be responding directly to the Muslim radical minority and its anti-Christian polemic comes from the evangelical stream, using debate.

The plethora of modes of interaction presented above is an appropriate reflection of the rich tapestry of both Christianity and Islam. An issue for Christian consideration is whether such diverse approaches may well be appropriate, given the diversity of Muslim communities with which Christians are interacting. It would be inappropriate to engage in robust debate with congenial Muslim traditionalists, just as it would be to engage in soft dialogue with Muslim radical activists. It may well be that Christians interacting with Muslims need a kitbag of tools as it were, selecting the appropriate tool according to the type of Muslim with which they come into contact.

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