

## How Are We To Assess Islam?

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Catholicism is still the largest religious group in the world with over a billion adherents. After that come somewhere in the region of 900 million Muslims, who currently form the fastest growing religious group on the planet. This is reason enough for us Christians to turn our attention to Islam and try to understand its theology and its spiritual motivation. The Vatican has a department for official dialogue with Muslims, and there are similar structures at Episcopal level in many territories. But there is little, if any awareness of this important challenge among the ordinary people of God. Inter-religious dialogue has received nothing like the attention that ecumenical dialogue has in recent years. Yet Islam has become a hot topic in the secular press. Following what Americans refer to as 9/11, Islam has frequently been discussed in the media, in a belated attempt to understand a religion that has long since been an integral part of our social landscape. The very context of the discussion has made it controversial and fraught with tension. Islam is seen primarily as a problem and a threat. It is seen to be linked to questions of violence and aggression, rather than to questions of truth, goodness and inter-religious dialogue. Many Muslims complain that the use of the term "Islamic terrorists" to describe those who perpetrated atrocities in America, Indonesia and elsewhere is inaccurate and prejudicial, equating the whole Islamic faith itself with the fanaticism of a few. Of course they are right to point out that many, even most ordinary Muslims who live in the West abhor such tactics and do not wish to be identified with these extremist militants. However organisations like Al Qaeda and Islamic Jihad do explicitly use the name of Islam to identify themselves and their aims, and they frequently appeal to the Koran to justify their actions. For example the apparent condoning of conversion by force found in verse (or Sura) 21:93 of the Koran: Fight against them until idolatry is no more and Allah's religion reigns supreme. But if they mend their ways, know that Allah is with the righteous. And the uncompromising verse 9:37 which says: Prophet make war in the unbelievers and the hypocrites and deal rigorously with them. Hell shall be their home: an evil fate. [1]

These groups argue that they are the most authentic expression of the Islamic ideal of jihad. Physical warfare is not actually the primary meaning of jihad in traditional Islamic thinking. It means 'struggle against evil' in all its forms; so it includes the personal struggle against temptation and also the social struggle for purity of life and culture. But by extension it can mean armed resistance against invaders or anyone who threatens the Islamic community and its divinely appointed way of life. And the Koran as a whole, like some parts of the Old Testament, can certainly give a very warlike impression of Allah and of his people.[2] Violence is justified in Islam much as in the Christian theory of a just

war ie. as a response to an aggressor. Islam clearly forbids the taking of innocent life.[3] However the idea of vengeance is regarded much more approvingly in the Koran than in the Bible[4], so paying back the aggressor in kind is considered quite acceptable, even laudable. Also, given the deep sense of pan-Islamic solidarity, taking vicarious revenge for the wrongs done to a fellow believer can also be seen as a godly act. Such notions are not confined to Islam of course. Much the same thinking seems to inform the political ideology of the USA just now, with wars justified by notions of America as the instrument of God's righteous punishment on 'rogue' or 'evil' nations, and of armed invasion as simple pay-back for harm, actual or even potential harm, done to any US citizen or economic interest. And the Zionism of David Ben Gurion took the theory of revenge to new depths, encouraging his terrorist activists to hit back twice as hard as they were hurt – a philosophy that the State of Israel lives and dies by to this day. These patterns of thought lie behind all sides of the intractable and spiralling violence in Israel/Palestine. So whilst Islamic ideology is by no means the sole factor at play in that awful situation, it is easy to see how some mullahs (who are Koranic commentators not 'priests' in any Christian sense) can identify all Western culture and even all non-Muslims as an 'evil empire' to be resisted with both moral and physical force. It is true that such people are an extremist minority within Islam. In Christian terms they are more akin to the Branch Davidians of Waco, Texas or some of the far right evangelical preachers in America. But just as the lunatic fringe of Christian preaching in the US still finds a disturbing echo in the wider culture - the widespread self perception of the USA as 'God's own country', and the literal crusading mentality of someone like Donald Rumsfeld, for example - so in a similar way the views of Islamic extremist movements also find a wider echo in popular opinion across the Muslim world. From Syria to Egypt many ordinary people do now see armed struggle, and even so-called suicide missions[5], as a justifiable response to institutionalised injustices and Western backed violence against their Islamic brethren, especially the brutal repression of the Palestinian Arabs by Israel. However, if we are to understand Islam properly we should not remain at the level of political and social analysis. The topical issues of violence and extremism really throw up more fundamental questions about Islam as a religious phenomenon throughout history and in today's world.[6] The fanatics may well be accused of perverting Islam – the very word means 'peace' - but how are we to know which is the real Islam? What is the authentic interpretation of its texts and traditions?

There are currently seventy-two different groupings in Islam – Sunni, Shi'i and Sufi being the most numerous and well known. The Sunni/Shi'i split dates back to shortly after Mohammed's death, when the line of social and religious authority in the Islamic community – the Caliphate - was violently disputed among the members of Mohammed's extended family. This was not only a quarrel about dynasty, but also about the very nature of authority within Islam. The Shi'ite party hold that true religious authority derives from the family bloodline of Mohammed himself. They revere a series of hereditary leaders who descended from

Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law, Ali the fourth Caliph. He lost his title to another claimant and was then murdered by one of his own guards, thus beginning a schism between the supporters of the new Caliphate (Sunni) and the partisans of Ali and his descendants (Shi'i). These became known as 'Imams', who are seen by Shi'ites as the genuine 'apostolic succession' from the prophet. When this family line failed in the ninth century AD, effective authority passed to a council of twelve scholars who then elected a new supreme Imam, who technically acts as a caretaker until the bloodline is restored.[7] Sunnis, on the other hand, no longer have a central authority figure, not since the end of the Caliphate with the demise of the Ottoman Empire. Neither do they have a formal clergy, only Koranic scholars and respected jurists who may give non-binding opinions. These are divided into four main schools of thought based at the major Islamic universities around the world. But all Sunnis regard themselves as a global family and a single, unbroken tradition. Sunnis still form the great majority (about 85%) of Muslims, especially across most of the Arabic speaking heartlands of North Africa and the Middle East. Shi'is are concentrated in Iraq and Iran, with large minorities in Kuwait, Bahrain, Pakistan, Afghanistan and parts of the Yemen. The best known modern example of a Shi'ite supreme Imam was the Iranian leader Ayyatollah Khomeini, whose portrait still hangs in many Shi'ite homes. They believe that their supreme Imam inherits some of Muhammad's inspiration and much of his authority. Shi'ism can therefore appear to be a more organised form of Islam than the Sunni branch. However in practice all branches of Islam are primarily focussed on the home and the local mosque rather than any centralised religious body. The global unity and cohesion of Islam is based on political, doctrinal and emotional bonds rather than on institutional or ecclesial structures. Shi'ite teaching in particular inculcates intense feelings of clan loyalty, combined with passionate devotion and energetic religious fervour.

Shi'ites regard the first twelve Imams as "masters and intercessors before God", even adding the name of Ali to their basic profession of faith alongside Mohammed. And since at least two of these "rightly guided Imams" were murdered, Shi'ite spirituality is also dominated by the theme of martyrdom and a sense of having been persecuted from the beginning. It is Shi'ite groups who can be seen slapping their bare chests with almost masochistic vigour for days on end during the feast of Husayn the Martyr (son of Ali, grandson of Mohammed) at his shrine at Karbala in southern Iraq. This behaviour is then echoed at the funerals of Palestinian 'martyrs', organised by Hizbollah, a Shi'ite group. The adherents of the Shi'ite and Sunni traditions are still very divided, sometimes violently so, as has been seen in Pakistan recently. The divisions are often political and economic as well as doctrinal. Shi'ites tend to come from the poorer, rural classes, as well as other groups who have historically felt downtrodden or alienated within their own culture. Sunnis, as a very broad generalisation, tend to be drawn from more urban and urbane elites. However, at official level at least, the Sunnis regard the Shi'ites as a "fifth school" of acceptable Islam.[8] The other well known branch of Islam – Sufism - is not so much a clear cut grouping as a movement for seeking spiritual enlightenment and mystical experience within the

framework of Islamic belief. It draws on influences from Jewish Cabalism, as well as Asian religions, Greek gnosticism and even Christianity. As a result it can be viewed with suspicion by some Muslims. It is often based around local groups who use music, chant and dance to induce trance states and ecstatic fervour. Sufi groups tend to be rather secretive, or at least private, although some of their ideas and practices have now found their way into Western culture via the fashion for 'world' music and in psychological models like the Enneagram. Other Islamic sects like the Wahabbi, who form the ruling house of Saudi Arabia, the Alawite, who make up the ruling party in Syria, the Lebanese Druze and the lesser known Ahmadiyya, have all grown up at various times and in various places for a variety of reasons. It is very difficult to generalise about these divisions within Islam. They are not nearly as clearly defined as the various Christian denominations. Some are more akin to revivalist movements, others are more politicised groupings in particular regions, others again are true religious sects which regard even many fellow Muslims as inauthentic and destined for damnation. But generally there is a deep sense of unity and fellowship among all Muslims of whatever stamp, especially when it comes to relationships with the non-Muslim world. Among most Muslims there is a deep sense of ambiguity, rising at times to intense frustration, about the current position of Islam on the political and economic world stage. They look back with nostalgia to the time of the great Kurdish anti-crusader war leader known to the West as 'Saladin'; to the flowering of Moorish power and culture which straddled north Africa and most of Spain during the middle ages; and to the Ottoman Empire that dominated the Middle East and Eastern Europe until relatively recently. This, they feel is how things ought to be, how things should have remained for the chosen ones of Allah. The loss of political and economic dominance in these regions to the Christian infidels, and particularly now that the secular West is so morally corrupt and evidently under the rule of Satan - a real and highly significant figure in Islamic consciousness - is a source of both pain and confusion. Surely Allah must soon restore the rightful place of his people in the world? The relative poverty and powerlessness of many Muslim countries nowadays is in itself an offence to their religious sensibility, although this is frequently mixed with racial and social self-perceptions as being downtrodden and despised by powerful foreigners, particularly Americans. A common Arab view of the recent war with Iraq, for example, is one of deep disappointment in Saddam Hussein, not because they bore him any affection, but they had hoped that he would at least give the Americans a bloody nose, thus redressing the wounded sense of Arab racial pride. Perhaps it would have been a sign of Allah's favour and of the approaching Day of Judgment when true believers will be vindicated and God's enemies humiliated.

We can see, then, that to ask how Islam understands itself vis a vis modernity is of crucial importance in understanding both the internal tensions within the Muslim community and the considerable tensions between Islamic countries and the rest of the world community. Clarity about these things may give us some

clues as to why the extremist or 'fundamentalist' reaction has arisen as a strand within modern Islam.

The question is given all the more urgency because we can no longer speak in simple geographic terms of a Muslim world and 'the West'. Muslims are a large and vital presence in the populations of most western democracies now, and western culture is, in turn, an almost universal influence even in predominantly Muslim countries, especially through the medium of television and advertising. The frontiers are now spiritual and intellectual more than they are physical and military. But the depth of mutual ignorance – ghettos of the mind - between those who live down neighbouring streets is if anything deeper and more socially divisive than in the middle ages, even with their periodic crusades. When St. Augustine of Canterbury went to Britain from Rome in the 7th century he was annoyed with the local Christians for having failed to reach out to the pagan incomers – the Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Frisians who became the English nation – and offer them the Gospel. He would have been equally exasperated were he to arrive in our own country today, because of our all but complete failure to engage with the new immigrant communities in our midst, either for dialogue or for evangelisation. It is perhaps not easy for us to know where or how to approach such dialogue. For among the major religions of the world, Islam occupies a very particular and in many ways problematic position with respect to Christianity. Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism as well as the many animist religions around the world all predate the Incarnation in their origins and could be said to arise from the common human search for the divine. It is possible for us to assess them as approximations to the truth which can then be corrected and fulfilled in Christ and his Church. The origins of Islam, however, post dates Jesus Christ by over six hundred years. Islam does display a kinship to the Judeo-Christian tradition in that it claims to be a religion of revelation, indeed importing many biblical stories into its own scriptures, albeit often in a strangely transmuted form. Islam believes in one God, looks to the final Resurrection and the Day of Judgement, and shares many aspects of the basic moral law. These and many other religious elements were adopted by Mohammed directly from the Judaic and Christian communities of his day. But Islam also displays a profound level of discontinuity with the Judeo-Christian tradition. It claims to be a new revelation which is God's final word to the world. So precisely in order to make this claim, Mohammed had to deny the prior Christian claim to be exactly that. In this basic sense Islam cannot help but be in competition with Christianity. The Koran reinterprets various the Old Testament scriptures to suit this thesis and also rejects the New Testament outright in favour of its own interpretation of what it claims was the real message of Jesus, which it calls the 'Injeel' (an Arabic mutation of the Greek 'evangelion' or gospel), although there is no written source for this claim. Large sections of the Koran consist of re-workings of biblical material, paraphrasing and altering its meaning in the process. Where the Koran refers to Jesus - and it always does so in terms of great respect - it draws mostly on the apocryphal gospels and also some Gnostic traditions. It is possible that this is due to an illiterate Mohammed half remembering verbally repeated lessons

from Jewish or Christian sources and then, whether consciously or unconsciously, editing and adapting them to suit his own religious outlook. But more importantly the Koran also contains specific and detailed denials of all the key doctrinal features of Christianity – the Blessed Trinity, the Incarnation and the Redemption. In this sense the medievals had a point when they labelled Islam as a kind of heresy, even though Mohammed was never a baptised Christian.[9] This is not intended to be offensive to Muslim believers, but is a logical assessment of Islam from the Christian perspective. In these central matters it is simply not possible to see Islam as a partial, if flawed, truth which is fulfilled in Christ. However, in other respects, it would also be possible to understand the origins of Islam as the yearnings of a pagan Arab mind searching for truth and goodness and finding only some elements of it in a time of confused and conflicted Christian witness. Mohammed grew up on the edge of a troubled Byzantine world in the late sixth century. He could easily have been in contact with Nestorian, Monophysite and Arian heretical sects, as well as Greek monasticism (hence the Muslim habit of prayer five times a day) and various streams of esoteric Jewish thought. There also appear to have been other eclectic Arabic religious movements at the time that emphasised monotheism, prayer and purity, which may have exercised a deep influence over Mohammed. Arabic poetry, morality tales and pagan traditions have gone into the Koranic mix too. The result is undeniably a collection of sayings and stories with great depth and beauty of language and sometimes great spiritual sensitivity and nobility, although its dominant emphasis on the wrathful judgment of God far exceeds anything found in the Bible. The word 'koran' (or quran) means 'recitation' and is deemed to be a literal dictation to Mohammed of a heavenly original by the angel Gabriel. Ordinary Muslims often assert that the Koran is therefore a perfect text, unchanged in any detail from the angelic words given to Mohammed. This is the routine teaching in many mosques, but it is not actually a universal Islamic claim, and is certainly not true. There are two distinct editions of the Koran in circulation today – the Hafs and the Warsh – with a number of disputed passages and there is also record of numerous earlier variations, some of them considerable. As many as seven or even nine different versions were being claimed at one stage. Mohammed himself wrote nothing, but he dictated oracles over many years to professional rememberers, some of whom wrote them down on pieces of wood, leather, stone or parchment. So the process by which a coherent text of his sayings began to be collected some years after his death was inevitably fraught with difficulty.[10] But even during his own lifetime there appear to have been competing versions of what exactly he had said. This fact, perhaps surprisingly, does not seem to have worried Mohammed himself. His only concern was that there should be no confusion between sayings that constitute a 'warning' and those that give a 'blessing'. [11] All of this is well documented and has long been recognised by authoritative scholars in the Islamic world; the doctrinal get-out clause being that the heavenly original of the Koran is indeed perfect, but the earthly copy is imperfect, as are all human works, although not in any matter of significance.

However a process of textual criticism such as the Bible has been subjected to in recent years would be unthinkable in Islam[12], because The Koran itself replaces the Incarnation in Islamic consciousness and is held in an analogous reverence to the person of Christ. (The man Mohammed is highly honoured, but is certainly not seen as divine). In this regard the idea of a 'heavenly Koran', an eternal 'Word of God', existing within the mind of Allah is extremely interesting from the point of view of inter-religious dialogue about the Blessed Trinity.

The major groupings within Islam differ about the weight accorded to the various oral traditions of the prophet (the 'hadith') and about the line of political leadership and religious authority, but in all its branches Islam is very much a 'religion of the book'. That is to say it is a religion based on a 'revealed' text. God's mind is incarnate in the pages of the book, the very recitation of which is considered to be an act of prayer and spiritual illumination. This is why learning the Koran by heart is the first aim, and sometimes the only aim, of Islamic schools. There is accordingly a tremendous sense of divine transcendence and authority in Islam. But if you read the Koran from a Catholic point of view, what you miss most is any sense of divine immanence. Allah is a law-giver, protector of his own, punisher of his enemies, the Almighty Judge, stern and terrible to those who refuse him, merciful and compassionate to those who 'submit' to Him (this is the more accurate meaning of the word 'islam' – to make your peace with God by submitting to his law and his judgement), but there is no question of God revealing himself to human beings. God does not get involved with his people except from on high. Creation remains forever something apart from God. Men are under Allah's holy rule, but can never be admitted to the Divine Presence Itself, let alone become 'co-sharers of the divine nature' as in Christianity. Such a thought would be considered blasphemous in Islam. The story is told in the hadith (the collected traditions of the prophet's life) that when he visited the rock of Abraham's sacrifice in Jerusalem (the site of the old Jewish temple where the Dome of the Rock now stands) Mohammed was swept up towards heaven on a white stallion. But as he approached the seventh heaven God's hand appeared and closed his eyes, sending him back with the admonition that 'no one sees Allah'. Jesus Christ said much the same: "No one has seen the Father", but then he added: "except the one who comes from God, he has seen the Father" (Jn 6, 46). The core of the difference between Islam and Christianity, therefore, lies in precisely this, that God the Son "who is in the bosom of the Father" reveals the unseen God to the world (Jn 1,18). By failing to grasp this central point of the Gospel, Islam reduces the very idea of revelation to a dictation of words: a message and a code of conduct. Revelation in Islam is simply the spelling out of God's law, his promises and threats and detailed prescriptions for a religious way of life. Even though 'the prophet' is considered to be a most noble instrument of God's purpose, he does not so much bring a fullness of revelation, as a final repetition of the perennial message, together with a last warning to humanity to accept it before the imminent Day of Wrath. It is consistent with this that in Islam the idea of heaven is really that of earthly pleasures writ large. Those who have submitted to the will of Allah will be feted with physical delights; and there are

corresponding tortures, outlined in graphic and grisly detail, in store for the damned. The promise of paradise in the Koran is literally a return to an inner worldly garden of Eden, a “well watered garden”. This image could of course be open to spiritual interpretation, however it is several times spelled out in detail which is difficult to interpret in other than highly sensual terms. The feasting in the gardens of paradise will be accompanied by “dark eyed houris (young girls)” (44:51) and “bashful virgins whom neither man nor jinee (spirits) have touched before” (55:41 – 78). Once again this is not being emphasised in order to be insulting to Muslims or their holy book, but to make the point that the vision of blessedness in Islam stops at the level of the creaturely. There is no Beatific Vision, no union and communion with the very being of God, no perfect and plenary gift of God’s self to his creation, which is what Christianity is all about.

Similarly prayer in Islam is about obeisance rather than relationship. The five times of daily prayer (salat) - to which the average Muslim is much more faithful, it has to be said, than the average Catholic is to any daily prayers at all - consist of a ritual recitation of words of faith accompanied by bodily prostrations. Performed with reverence this can indeed be an act of sincere adoration, but the Muslim has no expectation of a ‘spiritual life’ in the Catholic sense. There can be no deepening in a personal love of God as a true inner experience of grace in Islamic thinking. Mystical movements like the Sufis are an exception to this, but they are regarded as quasi-heretical by strict Muslims and can often be tinged with pantheism.

This is not to say that there is nothing of spiritual value from a Christian point of view in Islam. The five pillars of Islam – right belief, prayer, almsgiving, pilgrimage and struggle against evil (jihad) – are capable of elaboration into a philosophy of life which is far more ordered in goodness and kindness than anything which secular agnosticism has to offer. The duty of practical charity is impressively carried out by many Muslims and again puts many Christians to shame, even though this again is something taken directly from Christianity in the first place. All of this makes Islam relatively attractive to the more sincere kind of post-Christian agnostic who is hungry for doctrinal clarity and moral structure in the spiritual chaos of the Western world. The pop singer Cat Stevens (born Stephen Demetri Georgiou), now known as Yussuf Islam, is a well-known convert, but there are quite a number of others. For someone brought up on the shattered remains of English Protestantism or who has lapsed from poorly catechised Catholicism, Islam might look like a positive step towards divinity and spirituality. But from the point of view of someone who is well formed and deeply instructed in Catholicism, Islam is clearly a step down from the fullness of truth.

Despite its claim to revelation, Islam tends strongly towards rationalism. This can be seen in the standard Muslim critiques of the central mysteries of Christianity: the Trinity is dismissed as an illogical conundrum, no more than covert polytheism; the Incarnation is criticised because it makes God to be born in time, an impossibility for the Eternal Being it is argued; and the Redemption is rejected

because it involves one man taking responsibility for another's sin, a moral impossibility apparently. Thus all mystery is erased in our relationship with God. Religion is simply a matter of each person accepting his words and obeying his laws. Thus obedience to God is from human effort alone; there is no concept of grace. Although interestingly there is a Muslim notion of applying good works vicariously to the dead, a very Catholic idea that probably slipped into Islam from Byzantine Christianity. Despite its sometimes repressive harshness in practice, Islam actually compromises on many spiritual and moral standards that are native to Christianity. Perfect chastity, for example, is seen as impractical and impossible, hence the provision for men to take up to four wives -although not the other way round. There is even permission to take a temporary concubine when going on pilgrimage to Mecca, lest the prolonged absence from home prove too much of a temptation!

Because authority in Islam lies almost exclusively in the 'revealed' book, it remains closely bound to the words on the page of the Koran. As a result it is for the most part a very legalistic and casuistic religion. The overriding concern of all Islamic theology is simply to know what is 'permitted' and what is 'forbidden' by the Allah's commandments. Efforts are made to interpret and apply Mohammed's comprehensive instructions to new situations, but as history unfolds it has become increasingly obvious that the Koran is in fact limited by the cultural vision of the single human being who was its author. The religion was fixed in all essential details in the sixth century. The position of women is a good example of this - a controversial issue within Islam itself. Many more liberal minded Muslims point out, correctly, that wearing the head to toe tent-like covering imposed on women by the religious police of fundamentalist regimes like the Taliban, or in Saudi Arabia is not actually a requirement of Sharia law. A head scarf and covered wrists and ankles is all that is required. Nor does Islam forbid the education of women. In fact many provisions of the hadith are reasonably enlightened for their time when it comes to the relationship of the sexes. However the Koran does contain unavoidable and highly disturbing passages such as the following:

"Men have authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the others, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because Allah has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to their beds apart and beat them. Then if they obey you, take no further action against them. Allah is high, supreme." (4:34)

On this and other issues Islam has an intractable problem with modernity, and there is no room here for development of doctrine. In fact there is not really any such thing as development of doctrine in Islam. There is no concept parallel to the Christian idea of the Holy Spirit leading us into all truth; no unfolding vision of God, no salvation history, no entering into the Mind of Christ to grasp the length and the breadth, the height and the depth of God's Wisdom. This is not to belittle

the cultural achievements of the Arabic, Berber and Turkish empires of the Middle Ages, which were considerable. These were not actually exclusively Islamic, but they were dominantly so. When Islam broke upon the world as a dynamic military and religious force at the start of the seventh century, it filled the vacuum left by the crumbling Byzantine empire. The early Muslims inherited the wealth, both material and intellectual, of the Greek speaking civilization of the near East and North Africa which it took by force, making it available to a new and vibrant pan-Arabic movement. Accordingly it did flourish as an imperial and cultural force for some centuries. But the profound shift in world view occasioned by the modern scientific revolution has made for a fundamental crisis for Islam. It has no philosophical power to deal with modernity, only to resist and reject it. This is why Islamic revivalist movements like the Taliban tend to revert to the cultural trappings of the dark ages. The tendency of modern Islam, even though it has expansionist ambitions, is to close in on itself and reject the rest of the world. Most popular Islamic preaching maintains an absolute division between those who belong to the closed community of the faithful and the infidels who belong to the 'war zone'.<sup>[13]</sup> Many Muslims interpret the 'war zone' in spiritual terms and live in peace and mutual respect with Christian, Hindu, Buddhist or secular neighbours, whilst seeking to convert them by word and example, much as we would do ourselves.<sup>[14]</sup> But some see it as a literal theatre of war, the place where the final Armageddon will take place, and maybe take place soon.

Not all belong to this aggressive school of thought, as we have seen. But modern Muslims still believe stridently in the infallibility of their own faith and are usually well instructed in apologetics for their own beliefs. They generally perceive Christianity as a spent force, hopelessly compromised with liberal thought and life-styles. They are often surprised to find Christians who will challenge back with reason and confidence. All too rarely do they meet equally well-informed Catholics who can engage in constructive dialogue and demonstrate the full intellectual, moral and spiritual beauty of Christianity. We are failing our Muslim brothers and sisters not only because of our ignorance of their religion, but because of ignorance of our own!

A full consideration of Muslim theology has not been possible in this article, nor am I qualified to undertake it. But after a brief survey of the scene, how are we to assess Islam from a Christian point of view? It is possible to discern within the Koran the early religious fervour of Mohammed as he calls urgently and passionately for simple faith, purity of life and daily homage to God's majesty and submission to his holy will. Then another layer of 'revelations' can then be discerned, more complex and tangled, that begin to grapple (unsuccessfully) with Christian theology and to prescribe more and more detailed norms for a group way of life. A third layer can also be distilled, which show an increasing concern with Mohammed's own position and authority. These 'revelations' justify battles undertaken at the prophet's command, for example, and even exonerate

questionable episodes in his own personal behaviour, appearing to place him beyond criticism because of his exalted status.[15] On this basis we may perhaps posit something genuine about Mohammed's initial religious experience in a desert cave at the age of forty, an experience that gave him the impetus to unite the tribes of the Arabian peninsula into political unity under the banner of monotheism – an impressive achievement. But he fell short of true conversion and his new community became an assertively anti-Christian sect. His spiritual insight was clouded by limited moral vision and he gradually came to revel in his own power and prestige within the burgeoning movement. Finally he fell into the spiritual trap of building a personality cult for himself as the last and greatest of God's prophets.[16] As with all false cults, their modern followers may sincerely believe in them and not be guilty of their errors. Indeed they might be genuinely seeking after God and serving him as far as their conscience goes. But when the cult or movement is considered as a whole, its fault and errors cannot be ignored. Over time they will lead humanity astray and block the human spirit from full access to the life of God. So is Islam a force for evil or for good? Like all religions, in the hands of fallen men it is capable of both. The better question is to ask: is it true or false? As Christians we must answer that it has something of both. I would take great care the way I expressed such an opinion to Muslim acquaintances, but I think it is a fair assessment of the origins of Islam and of the abiding ambiguities and contradictions in its relationship with other religions, especially with Judaism and Christianity, the other "people of the book". It does at least leave room for recognising genuine elements of grace and truth within Islam, whilst still firmly rejecting what is contrary to the Gospel.

[1] Cf. also 66:9 All unspecified references are to the traditionally accepted chapters and verses of the Koran. English translations are taken from the Penguin Classics edition of The Koran, (Penguin, USA 5th edition, 2000) translated by N.J. Dawood. Quotations from the Bible are indicated by the usual abbreviations denoting the relevant book, chapter and verse.

[2] Sura 9:111-112 says: They will fight for His cause, slay and be slain. Such is the true pledge which He has made them in the Torah, the Gospel and the Koran. Notice here the self reference to 'the Koran', as if it were something already completed, possibly a sign that this is a later addition to the oracles, quite conceivably by Mohammed himself.

[3] Sura 21:90 says: Fight for the sake of Allah those who fight against you, but do not attack them first. Allah does not love the aggressors.

[4] Sura 21:91 goes on to say: Kill them wherever you find them. Drive them out of the places from which they drove you. Idolatry is worse than carnage.

[5] Suicide in the usually understood sense is clearly against Muslim teaching. These bombings are justified by their perpetrators, however, as acts of war. They identify the whole population of Israel (and by extension anyone who supports them) as unjust aggressors because of the forcible

occupation of Palestine and the ongoing despoiling of Palestinian lives and homes. So anyone who fights them is a warrior and thus potentially a 'martyr'.

[6] It should also be remembered that Islam is a religion not a nationality, just as Arabs are a race not a religion. By no means all Muslims are Arabic, and a significant minority of Arabs are Christian, as they were for many centuries before the birth of Mohammed.

[7] The last 'rightly guided' Imam was Al-Askari, a boy of four who disappeared in 873 AD within days of inheriting the role. Shi'ites believe that he is actually alive but hidden from the world and that one day he will return to inaugurate a new golden age of Islam.

[8] In 1959 Sheikh Mahmood Shaltoot, Head of the School of Theology at Al Azhar university in Cairo, the most august seat of learning of Sunni Islam and the oldest university in the world, issued a fatwa (ruling) recognizing the legitimacy of the Jafari School of Law to which most Shi'ites belong.

[9] St. John Damascene (John of Damascus) is one of the earliest and harshest Christian critics of Islam. But then he was a near contemporary of Mohammed and he grew up at the court of one of the early Caliph's, so he was in a good position to be well informed.

[10] Muslim scholars traditionally attribute this process to the Caliph Uthman thirteen years after Mohammed's death. He is said to have been disturbed to find so many different versions being recited, often with acrimonious disputes about which sayings of Mohammed were authentic. He ordered a standard text to be prepared from collated sources and all others to be destroyed! There are also a number of opinions recorded from early on in Muslim history which say that large portions of the original Koran were lost with the death of Mohammed's closest followers. A comprehensive study of this issue, which draws on Islamic scholarship itself, can be found at <http://www.answering-islam.org/Quran/Text/index.html>

[11] Mohammed even corrected himself at one stage by rescinding an earlier oracle which appeared to endorse the worship of three pagan goddesses traditionally associated with the cultic site at Mecca. He said that Satan had tricked him into saying these things, but then the angel Gabriel had corrected him. The text of the oracle in question is therefore referred to as the 'Satanic verses'. Salman Rushdie used this episode as the title of his notorious novel in order call into question the psychological basis of Mohammed's claimed revelations and to pour scorn on all religious experience as a psychotic delusion.

[12] The Koranic text is presented in chapters which are grouped according to loosely related content, which are often named for the most memorable image or verbal theme contained in them, such as "the bees", "women", "the cow" etc. Therefore the Koran does not read as a continuous text, in fact it is a complex jumble or patchwork quilt of sayings and stories. Nor do the verses reflect the historic order of Mohammed's utterances, which can only be guessed at.

[13] Muslim theology does consider the possibility that those who carry out good works may be allowed entry to paradise even if they are not Muslims, much like the Catholic principle of baptism of desire.

[14] The standard position is that Muslims should abide peaceably by the norms of a host non-Muslim country until such a point is reached where they are in the majority, either by conversion or by population increase, then Sharia law should be imposed upon all regardless of their faith allegiance.

[15] By special privilege Mohammed was allowed nine wives instead of the four allowed to ordinary believers, and even then he allowed himself further sexual licence, receiving a special 'revelation' that this was his right as the Prophet and his critics, in particular his first wife, should be quiet under pain of God's wrath! (cf. 33:50 and 66:1-4)

[16] It is fair to say that the man himself always put down any attempt to exalt him any further, although popular devotion among the faithful now often regards him as the greatest human being.