

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

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

A major problem for both Christians and Muslims is that Islam has in recent times been hijacked by Salafi and Wahhabi sects. The Salafi sect developed in Egypt in the late 19th century as a response to European imperialism, with roots in the 18th century Wahhabi movement that originated in the Najd region of modern day Saudi Arabia. These sects make up only about 5% of Islam but their determination to wipe out non-Muslims and to force their violent interpretation of the Qur'an on other Muslims has coloured everyone's view of Islam. One danger is that this can easily encourage the impression that there is no common ground and no hope of productive dialogue. The only solution, according to some, is to meet violence with greater violence.

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

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

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

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

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

The Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopalian priest, in her Introduction to *Prayer of the Heart in Christian and Sufi Mysticism*, by a Sufi author, Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee (2012), writes:

'Sufism arose in the cradle of Islam to receive and nurture those teachings of the heart that had first been planted in those Near-Eastern lands directly from the living heart

of Jesus. Sufism and Christianity are joined at the heart ... They are kindred pathways of transfiguration through love. Both traditions picture the spiritual journey with the same core metaphor: as a cosmic love song that begins in exile and ends in divine intimacy.'

In "*The Knowing Heart: a Sufi Path of Transformation*" (1999), the Sufi, Kabir Helminski, writes:

'The lives and teachings of Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad have influenced and transformed so many billions of people because they are essentially teachings of love' (page 40).

Especially inspiring is the love poetry of the Sufi saint Jelal al-Din al-Rumi (1207-1273). In his 492 page book: *Rumi, the Big Red Book: the great masterpiece celebrating mystical love and friendship* (HarperOne 2010), Coleman Barks tells why he was drawn to the Sufis:

'I have been drawn to the Sufis for their emphasis on the numinous as it transpires through beauty and harmony, and love. I find that when I am around them (and around Taoist and Zen masters too) the possessiveness of the ego lessens and I feel joy overflowing through the createdness. And that feels like the soul's truth' (page 325).

Barks also describes what Rumi's son, Sultan Velad, felt when Shams, Rumi's spiritual teacher and intimate friend, spoke the Qur'an and the sayings of Muhammad to him:

'He sowed new love in my soul. He revealed secrets. He made me fly without wings and reach the ocean with no boundaries where I found peace and, like a bird freed from a trap, felt safe from all dangers' (*Veladnama*, quoted Barks, page 324).

How many Muslims over the centuries have been similarly moved by listening to the Qur'an!

Rumi is beautifully respectful of Jesus and of the Christian New Testament. He writes:

'The miracle of Jesus is himself' (quoted Barks page 335).

'Inside the friend, where rose and thorn blend,
to one opening point, the Qur'an,
the New Testament and the Old,
flow together to become one text' (quoted Barks page 426).

Rumi's key insight is perhaps best expressed when he writes:

'Is there love, a drawing together of any kind, that is not sacred' (quoted Barks, page 16).

Husain writes of Muhyiddin ibn 'Arabi, a contemporary of Rumi:

'He had, like many Sufis, a special inclination toward the spiritual Jesus: "Jesus was my first master on the way; it was in his hands that I was converted. He watches over me at all

hours, not leaving me for a second ... I often met him in my visions; it was with him that I repented: he commanded me to practise asceticism and renunciation' (*al-Futuhatal-Makkiya* (The Meccan Revelations, quoted page 241). "He whom I [God] love, I am the eye with which he sees, the ears with which he listens' (quoted page 243).

"Ibn Arabi is remembered to this day across the Muslim world for these verses that he wrote in Mecca – for, like Rumi, Ibn Arabi found God in love:

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

I am not claiming that Rumi and Arabi are typical of Sufis. They do remind us that it is possible for Christians to influence Moslems. This cannot happen without respect, without love. Love is not naïve. There are dangerous people around who identify as Christians. We need to protect the community from them. The same can be said of people who claim to be Muslims. It is still the case that the world needs Christians who are faithful to the mission given us by Jesus: a mission of love.

When it comes to community we have a lot to learn from our Muslim brothers and sisters. Increasingly in the 'Christian West' religion is being swept, if not under the carpet, then to the periphery of public life. There is immense pressure to identify religion as an individual affair. The human hunger for personal, and therefore communal, identity is expressed in the song 'I am, you are, we are, Australian'. The sporting stadiums witness to this. An argument can be made to connect the individualizing of religion and the modern epidemic of loneliness and anxiety. Muslims see this for what it is: a profound cultural weakness. They have a lot to teach us here.

The Second Vatican Council reminds us: 'Whatever good is found sown in people's minds and hearts or in the rites and customs of peoples, these are not only preserved from destruction, but are purified, elevated and perfected for the glory of God' (*Lumen Gentium*, 1964, n. 17).

Pope Paul VI expresses current Christian understanding when he writes that 'people can gain salvation also in other ways, by God's mercy, even though we do not preach the Gospel to them' (*Evangelisation in the Modern World*, 1975, n.80). Our privilege as Jesus' disciples is to continue his mission, telling others of him and drawing them into the embrace of his love. While we are faithful to the mission given us, we know that his love is not limited to our efforts.

In the same letter Paul VI writes (n.53): 'The Church respects and esteems these non-Christian religions because they are the living expression of the soul of vast groups of people. They carry within them the echo of thousands of years of searching for God, a quest which is incomplete but often made with great sincerity and righteousness of heart. They

possess an impressive patrimony of deeply religious texts. They have taught generations of people how to pray. They are all impregnated with innumerable 'seeds of the Word' and can constitute a true 'preparation for the Gospel.'

In his letter *Mission of the Redeemer*, 1990, Pope John-Paul II writes:

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

'We must have respect for human beings in their quest for answers to the deepest questions of life, and respect for the action of the Holy Spirit in people ... Every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit who is mysteriously present in every human heart.'(n. 29)

'God does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression, even when they contain gaps, insufficiencies and errors ... Dialogue with those of other religions is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills' (n. 55-56).

1. Muhammad and the Qur'an

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

Even before his first 'vision' in 610AD, aged forty, Muhammad used to retire to a cave on Mount Hira (see Sûrah 96 and the account of his first vision as described in *The Study Quran* pages 1535-1536). For the next twenty-three years till his death, aged sixty-two, he saw himself, and his disciples saw him, as a man inspired (Sûrah 6:50, 6:107; 18:111; 35:19; 46:9). He aspired to follow the religion of Abraham (Sûrah 16:123), as revealed by earlier prophets, especially Moses and Jesus, whom he accepted as vehicles of God's revelation (see Sûrah 4:150). Muhammad saw his role as converting Arabian pagan tribes, who were polytheists, to faith in the One God, and as God's chosen instrument in cleansing Judaism and Christianity of what he judged to be accretions that had brought about division (see Sûrah 5:14), and what he judged to be distortion of the revelations made through Moses and Jesus (see Sûrah 3:55).

From 610 to 623 Muhammad lived in Mecca. Typically, the revelations from that period tend to be more respectful of Jews and Christians. Sûrah 16:125 is one among many examples: *'Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation. And dispute with them in the most virtuous manner. Surely your Lord is He who knows best those who stray from His way, and knows best the rightly guided.'* He was trying to win them over to submit to the One God and to himself as God's Messenger. He saw himself as being in the line of the prophets, sent to warn the people and to condemn the pagan Arabs, Jews and Christians who refused to accept the warning given to them by God through him (Sûrah 35:42), by refusing to join the 'believers' (*al-mu'minun*), who surrendered to God (*muslimun*).

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

In 623 Muhammad left Mecca and fled to Yathrib, a journey of 300km. This 'flight' (*Hijrah*) marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar. Yathrib came to be called 'Medina' ('The City'). It was his base for the last ten years of his life, during which he was the head of a growing, social, political and religious community. From 623-627 he was involved in a fight to the death with his own tribe, the Quraysh of Mecca. From this conflict he and his followers finally emerged victorious. Muhammad himself took part in twenty-seven military campaigns between his arrival at Medina and his death in 632AD. During his Medinah period Muhammad acted as a warlord. Abbé Guy Pagès in his *Interroger l'Islam* (DMM 2013) quotes Muslim historians' accounts of the violence, typical of his day, that Muhammad used against his enemies. On page 171 he writes: 'We read in the biography of Muhammad by Ibn Hisham [Sira II, ch. 240-241] that, after digging a pit in the square at Medina. Muhammad participated in the decapitation of 600 to 700 males of the Jewish tribe of Banu Quraydha.' None of this is surprising when we consider the violent times in which Muhammad lived. Problems arise when we are asked to believe that he behaved in this way in response to God's instructions.

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

The authors of *The Study Quran* admit that it is not always possible to be certain what parts of a sûrah come from Mecca and what parts come from Medina. Because the timing of the revelations is not without significance, when Muslim commentators are confident in attributing a text to Mecca or to Medina, I will note this when introducing a sûrah. When scholars are divided I will indicate this by a "?".

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

This is a very different process from the way the Christian New Testament was formed. The Qur'an claims to be a record of revelations given to Muhammad, and to Muhammad alone, through the Angel Gabriel. A Muslim is a person who submits to this revelation, accepting it as God's final revelation, and accepting Muhammad as God's Messenger. The Qur'an is foundational for Islam. This is not the case with the New Testament. Foundational to Christian faith is Jesus. Memories of Jesus and reflections on his significance circulated orally for over thirty years before the composition of the Gospels. The New Testament is a beautiful fruit of Christian faith, but it is not foundational. Christian faith is a sharing in the faith of the early disciples. This faith is expressed in the New Testament, and is a sharing in the faith of Jesus.

Another difference between the Qur'an and the New Testament is how the decision was made as to which books are to be accepted as authentic. 'Uthman decided for the Qur'an. For the New Testament it was a matter of which books rang true to people's memories of Jesus and to the faith of the community. Such books were copied and distributed and cherished. Other writings were neglected. Usage by Christian communities was the deciding factor.

'Uthman was succeeded by 'Ali, the husband of Muhammad's daughter, Fatima. 'Ali was assassinated in 661. His son, with seventy-two companions, was killed at Karbala (in today's Iraq). This led to the Sunni-Shi'a schism: the Shi'a look to 'Ali.

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

The Qur'an is divided into 114 sūrah (perhaps best translated as 'sections'). As we shall see when examining the sūrah, many of them move through a number of themes, and contain material from different periods. For the most part the sūrah are arranged according to length. Sūrah 1 has a special place. It is followed by the longest sūrah (Sūrah 2). The last surah (Sūrah 114) is the shortest.

2. The Qur'an and the Jewish Scriptures

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

There are many parallels in the way God is portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the Qur'an. Comparisons can be made between the tribal conditions of Ancient Israel and the tribal conditions of seventh century Arabia. Violence, for example, was endemic to both.

Furthermore, Judaism and Islam have a similar structure as religions. This is not surprising when we see Muhammad's familiarity with Jewish writings. Both religions have a prophet (Moses, Muhammad), a sacred Scripture (the Tanach, the Qur'an), and both religions recognise our human obligation to believe, and to submit to the will of God as revealed through the prophets, the messengers sent by God.

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

Before detailing the references to Jewish literature found in the Qur'an it is important to observe a distinction. For the most part the stories as we find them in the Hebrew Scriptures are the fruit of hundreds of years of story-telling. They are often quite subtle and brilliant. (We will be examining one in detail shortly.) In the Qur'an the stories are not retold. Rather they are referred to in order to make a point: either as witnessing to the power and compassion of God, or as a warning to submit to the revelation God is now giving through Muhammad.

Like the Book of Genesis the Qur'an presents God as creating the universe 'in six days' (Sūrahs 10:4; 32:4). It focuses on the creation of the human race (see especially Sūrahs 15 and 32:7-9). It speaks of the fall of Adam and Eve, and the conflict between the sons of Adam (Sūrah 5:27-30). One of the Qur'an's recurring stories is that of Noah and the flood (Sūrahs 37:75-77; 71). Noah is seen as a type of Muhammad, and the punishment of the flood as a warning to Muhammad's contemporaries who refused to believe the revelations that God was making through him (e.g., Sūrahs 11, 23, 25 and 29). The Qur'an speaks of Abraham, the father of the Arab peoples through Ishmael (Sūrahs 19:54-5; 38:49). Abraham was the first Muslim (Sūrahs 15, 19; 37:83-113). Another of the Qur'an's recurring subjects is the story of Lot who was saved by God when the cities of the Dead Sea were destroyed (Sūrahs 15:51-74; 25; 29; 37:133-138). Muhammad sees what happened to Sodom as a warning to his contemporaries not to reject the revelation God is giving them through him. He knows of the patriarchs Isaac and Jacob (Sūrah 19), and Joseph (Sūrah 12), and Ishmael (Sūrah 2:125, 136).

Like the Book of Exodus the Qur'an speaks of Moses (see Sūrahs 2, 17, 19, 20, 23, 26, 28, 32 and 33). Moses' confrontation with the pharaoh of Egypt prefigures for Muhammad his confrontation with the pagan Arabs (Sūrahs 20 and 26). In Sūrah 7 Muhammad speaks of the plagues of Egypt (7:103-137 – another of his recurring stories), the crossing of the Red Sea (7:138), the giving of the Torah (7:142-145), the worship of the golden calf (7:148-154 – yet another oft recurring story), the seventy men given the gift of prophecy (7:155), Moses striking the rock (7:160), and the manna from heaven (7:160). Muhammad sees the refusal of the Jews to accept him as a prophet as analogous to the refusal of the Israelites to believe in Moses and God's revelation through him (Sūrah 20). The Qur'an mentions the Torah (Sūrahs 5 and 17), including the story of the punishment of Korah (Sūrah 28 – see Numbers 16:32).

From outside the Torah, the Qur'an mentions David (Sūrah 33:10 and 38:18-27 – see 2 Kings), the Queen of Sheba (Sūrah 27:22-44 – see 2 Kings), and Solomon (Sūrah 34:12 and 38:31-41 – see 2 Kings).

It mentions from 1 Kings Elijah (Sûrah 37:123-132) and Elisha (Sûrah 38:49). It knows of Job (Sûrahs 21 and 38:42-45), Jonah (Sûrah 10:99 and 37:139-148 – another of its recurring stories) and Ezra (Sûrah 9).

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

As the story goes, when Abraham's wife, Sarah, was unable to conceive, she persuaded Abraham to have a child with her maidservant, Hagar. However, when Hagar conceived, Sarah was overwhelmed with envy and 'dealt harshly with her' (Genesis 16:6). The words 'dealt harshly' are used for the way the Egyptians treated the Hebrews in Egypt (Exodus 1:11-12)! The Biblical account ensures that our sympathy as we read the narrative is not with Sarah, it is with Hagar who runs away to avoid harsh treatment from Sarah. The angel of the LORD, we are told, appeared to her and told her to go back, but added: "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted. Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the LORD has given heed to your affliction" (Genesis 16:9-10). There are echoes here of the Promise made earlier to Abraham: 'Look toward heaven and count the stars. So shall your descendants be' (Genesis 15:5). We are told that the place of the encounter was called 'Beer-lahai-roi' (the well of the One who lives and sees') because Hagar was seen by and saw the LORD and lived (Genesis 16:13-14). This place will appear later in the story (Genesis 24:62).

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

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

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

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

Just before recording Abraham's death the Genesis story writes: 'Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. Jokshan was the father of Sheba and Dedan. The sons of Dedan were Asshurim, Letushim, and Leummim. The sons of Midian were Ephah, Ephher, Hanoah, Abida, and Eldaah. All these were the children of Keturah' (Genesis 25:1-4). Abraham is presented as the father of many nations. An early Rabbinic suggestion is that Keturah is Hagar, called 'Keturah' because 'her acts were as fragrant as incense [ketoret]' (see Midrash Tanhuma, Hayyei Sarah, 8; Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer, 29).

It is important to note that the Hebrew text, while asserting God's choice of Isaac for a special mission, speaks with moving affection of Hagar and Abraham's firstborn son, Ishmael, and so of the Arab peoples.

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

We now move to begin a comparison of the Muslim Qur'an and the Christian New Testament. Shortly I will focus on central themes of comparison. Then I will work my way systematically through the Qur'an, section by section. I will present, not the whole of the Qur'an, but those parts of it that seem to me of special interest or that lend themselves more readily to comparison with the New Testament Scriptures.

As already noted, the Qur'an frequently refers to stories from the Hebrew Scriptures. Reference to the Christian Scriptures is far less frequent. It refers to the story of Zechariah and John (Sûrah 19). It knows of the virgin Mary (Sûrah 19:20), and the miraculous conception of Jesus (Sûrah 3). However, only in the concluding verses of Sûrah 5 (verses 110-116) does the Qur'an refer to scenes from the public ministry of Jesus: the healing of the man who was born blind, the healing of the leper, the raising of the dead, and the multiplication of the loaves.

The Qur'an claims that Jesus foretold the coming of Muhammad.

'When Jesus, son of Mary, said: O children of Israel! Truly I am the Messenger of God to you, confirming that which came before me in the Torah, and bearing glad tidings of a Messenger to come after me, whose name is 'Ahmad ('more praiseworthy').' (Sûrah 61:6).

Jesus did see himself as a messenger from God, and as fulfilling the Torah: 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil' (Matthew 5:17). He also spoke of the coming of 'the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name' (John 14:26). However, he did not speak of the Spirit as 'Ahmad, a name which enables some Muslims to identify the Spirit promised by Jesus with Muhammad.

The Qur'an claims to bring to perfection the religion of Abraham, which God revealed to Moses and to Jesus.

'God sent His Messenger with Guidance and the Religion of Truth to make it prevail over all religion' (Sûrah 61:9; see 9:33; 48:28).

Muslims honour Jesus as a prophet chosen by God to follow Moses and to prepare for Muhammad. However, the Qur'an judged Christians to be 'disbelievers' (*kafirun*) because they failed to recognise Muhammad as the 'Seal of the prophets' (Sûrah 33:40).

The Qur'an's teaching on Jesus' death contradicts the New Testament.

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

The Qur'an misunderstands the Christian idea of the Triune God (see below, pages 19-22). It thinks that Christians teach that there are three gods: God, Mary and Jesus.

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

It is one thing to find reasons why Muhammad misunderstood Christian teaching. It is another to accept the statements of the Qur'an to be direct revelations from God, correcting an earlier revelation found in the New Testament. Again and again the Qur'an speaks against Christians calling Jesus 'the Son of God' (for example Sûrah 9:30). Perhaps Muhammad's misunderstanding of Christian belief in regard to Jesus was partly due to lack of clarity in Christian teaching. Once again, a problem arises if people attribute the misunderstanding to God by accepting the words of the Qur'an not as Muhammad's response to his experience, but as the very words of God.

4. Islam, a 'Religion of the Book'. Christianity, a Religion of a Person, Jesus.

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

In John's Gospel we hear Jesus say: 'The Father and I are one' (John 10:30). He wanted his disciples to experience this communion: 'May they be one, Father, as we are one' (John 17:11). 'May they all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me' (John 17:21).

It is Jesus himself who is the revelation. His words and the words of his disciples point to him, but they cannot contain him.

5. God, the Source and Sustainer of everything that exists

'In God we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28).

Nothing that we directly experience is self-explanatory. It exists, but it does not have in itself sufficient reason to account for its existence. Some choose to believe that reality simply is the way it is and doesn't need explaining. Others, encouraged by the small successes we have in our search for meaning, choose to believe that reality does ultimately make sense, and that since nothing that we directly experience is self-explanatory, there must exist a Reality that is not dependent on any other reality, but that has within itself a fully satisfying explanation for its existence. Things exist because they are held in existence by the Reality we call 'God'.

Fully comprehending this Reality is beyond our capacity. We know that if reality is ultimately meaningful, this Reality must exist, but we cannot define it. Any words we use to speak of this Reality can at best point us towards it. It remains mysterious.

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

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

The word that best points us toward the truth about 'God' as revealed by Jesus is the word 'Love'. This is also the teaching of Rumi and al-Arabi (see pages 5-6). To love is to give one's real self to another, with respect for the other. Where there is love, there we experience the 'Presence', the 'Mystery', the "Sacred"; there we experience 'God'. The universe is an expression of the divine. It is love that radiates the divine. When we love we are in communion with the mysteriously present God, the Ultimate Reality that sustains in existence everything we experience.

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

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

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

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

6. Monotheism

The first and most basic 'pillar' of Islam (*Shahâda*) is profession of faith in the One God and in Muhammad as his prophet. The other four pillars of Islam flow from the first: the requirement of ritual prayer (*Salât*); of almsgiving (*Zakât*); of fasting (*Sawm*, in Ramadân);

and of making a pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to Mecca once in a lifetime. These all feature in Sûrah 2, and in other sûrahs.

In almost every sûrah, Muhammad speaks of the awesome God, the Creator of everything. In his day the pagan tribes of Arabia were polytheistic. That there is only one God is basic to the teaching of Muhammad, as it is to Judaism and Christianity. Sûrah 42 expresses with particular clarity something found throughout the Qur'an:

'God has prescribed for you as religion that which He enjoined upon Noah, and that which We [God] revealed unto thee [Muhammad], and that which We enjoined upon Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, that you uphold religion and not become divided therein. Grievous for the idolaters is that which you call them. God chooses for Himself whomsoever He will, and guides unto Himself whosoever turns in repentance' (Sûrah 42:13, from Mecca).

'Say, He, God, is One! God, the Eternally Sufficient unto Himself. He begets not, nor was He begotten. And none is like to Him!' (Sûrah 122) (?)

Muhammad found full agreement about monotheism in the Scriptures of the Jews.

To be truly monotheistic we cannot say that there is only one God, and then go on to claim that this God is ours alone. If there is only one God then everything and everybody has the one Source of its being. A true monotheist must see everyone as fundamentally and inherently sacred, however badly people may be behaving. People we consider our enemies are not God's enemies. Jesus makes this abundantly clear, and it flows from his understanding of God:

'You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous ... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:43-48).

Christian Monotheism and the Trinity

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

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

When the authors of the Gospels shared this in their writings, they were sharing memories, but also reflections on Jesus and the meaning Jesus gave to their lives. The fact that the

community of Jesus' disciples treasured and copied and shared their words points to the Gospels as being inspired, but the words are the words of the Gospel writers, and cannot be understood without grasping the meaning their words had some thirty to sixty years after the death of Jesus.

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

In John chapter 5 we find an account of Jesus' healing a man. Because the healing took place on the Sabbath we are told: 'The Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the Sabbath' (John 5:16). We are then given Jesus' response: 'My Father is still working, and I also am working' (John 5:17). The text continues: 'For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, *thereby making himself equal to God*' (John 5:18). That this is not how John understood Jesus' claim is clear from Jesus' response:

'Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing' (John 5:19-20).

It was from his intimate communion with God that Jesus experienced the call and the grace to share with others the revelation that he received from God:

'My teaching is not mine but his who sent me' (John 7:16-17).

'I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him' (John 8:28-29).

'I declare to the world what I have heard from him' (John 8:26).

'I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence' (John 8:38).

'The word that you hear is not mine. It is from the Father who sent me' (John 14:24).

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

'Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work' (John 4:34).

'I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me' (John 5:30).

'The deeds that the Father has given me to complete, the very deeds that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me' (John 5:36).

'I do nothing on my own. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him' (John 8:28-29).

'It is the Father living in me who is doing this work' (John 14:10).

'Jesus cried aloud: "Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me" (John 12:44-45).

Jesus' disciples came to see him as the perfect human expression (the 'incarnation') of God. The Gospel of John expresses this well in the Prologue. After stating that the whole of creation is an expression of God's Self-giving Word, John tells us that God's eternal Word found perfect human expression in Jesus:

'The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace ... No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made God known' (John 1:14-18).

When we speak of Jesus' divinity, we are speaking of his intimate communion with God. Everything he is, everything he says, everything he does, flows from this communion. Such was the intimacy of this communion that Jesus could say: 'The Father and I are one' (John 10:30). Here again 'the Jews' misunderstood his claim. John writes:

'The Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus replied, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?" The Jews answered, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are *making yourself God*" (John 10:31-33).

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

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

It was their experiences of the crucified Jesus as raised by God to life and mysteriously present among them that alerted them to a more profound dimension of Jesus' communion with God. They came to see that in raising Jesus to life, 'God has made this crucified Jesus

both Lord (Κύριος) and Messiah' (Acts 2:36). The Greek Κύριος translates the Hebrew 'Adonay, which was the word sounded when YHWH was found in the Hebrew text. It is the 'Name' (HaShem) revealed by God to Moses in the scene of the burning bush when God commissioned Moses to go to Egypt and be God's instrument in liberating the Hebrew slaves (see Exodus 3:15).

The New Testament speaks of 'God' nearly twelve hundred times. The reference is to the One whom Jesus addressed as 'God' and 'Father'. However, it was not long before the Christian community embraced the practice of including Jesus when they spoke of 'God'. We find this in a letter written in the opening years of the second century to the community in Ephesus by Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch: 'Our God, even Jesus the Christ, was borne in the womb by Mary according to the dispensation of God, of the seed of David and of the Holy Ghost' (Ephesians 18). In a letter to the community in Rome he writes: 'Suffer me to copy the passion of my God' (Romans, 6).

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

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

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

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

7. The Divinity of Jesus and the Christian teaching of the Blessed Trinity

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

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

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

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

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

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

Christian monotheism is beautifully enriched by Christian teaching of the Trinity: a 'Trinity' understood firstly as God, Jesus and the Spirit of Love that flowed between them; a 'Trinity'

understood secondly as daring to speak of God as the Origin of all, as the divine Word, and as the divine Spirit.

The Qur'an misunderstands the Christian belief in the Trinity. It thinks that Christians worship Jesus and Mary as two gods beside God.

'O People of the Book! Do not exaggerate in your religion, nor utter anything concerning God save the truth. Verily the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of God, and his Word, which he committed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers, and say not "Three" (Sûrah 4:171, from Medina).

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

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

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

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

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

We cannot see the Transcendent God, but we believe that in watching the human Jesus we are watching how God wishes to reveal God's Self in human form. Jesus says: 'Whoever sees me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). When we speak of God's 'Word', we are speaking of

God achieving God's will through creating, forgiving and embracing in love. We Christians see Jesus as expressing this in a fully beautiful human way.

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

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

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

8. God's revelation and religious texts

The point I wish to make here is fundamental to the study of any and every religious text. I believe that God reveals God's Self to everyone. A person becomes aware of this when he or she has an insight into the Mystery, the Presence we call God. Whoever we are, and this applies to Moses and Jesus and Muhammad, when we give expression to a religious insight, the expression comes from us. When this expression is inspired by God, it is still a human expression of religious insight, and as such it carries with it the limitations inherent in any language. It must be understood within the context of the situation in which the revelation occurs.

This must be said of the sacred texts of Judaism. The Deuteronomists and the Priestly School and the other Schools that produced the Torah show the insights, but also the points of view, even the prejudices, of the authors. The same must be said of the prophets and their disciples, and the authors of the poetry, Wisdom Literature and Stories that we find in the Hebrew Bible.

We must say the same of the Christian Scriptures. The Gospels and the Letters of the New Testament are the responses to Jesus of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, James and the others. Christians continue to treat Jesus' words and actions found in the Gospels with the greatest respect for they offer a privileged window into the way Jesus' disciples came to see him, but we believe that it is Jesus himself who reveals God. The written words of the Christian New Testament were treasured by the early Christians because they judged them to point in an authentic way to Jesus, the revelation of God. But nevertheless they were words written by people who belonged in the culture of their time.

Raymond Brown writes: The Bible is the literary objectification of a faith that is a response to revelation' (Theological Studies 1981, page 9). He goes on to define Scripture as "divine revelation to which human beings have given expression in words' (page 13). Michael Schmaus in his Dogma Volume 1 page 188 writes:

'What we encounter in the Sacred Scriptures is first of all the objectivization of the belief in and understanding of Christ which was possessed by the Church or the local congregation. In other words it is the answer to the revelation of God. In this answer, however, the word of God itself is expressed, for this word has entered into the answer of the Church and is effective in it. On the other hand we must not forget that God's word, which enters into our human answer of faith, nevertheless always transcends it.'

The history of religious thought reveals that there are people of every religious persuasion who, rather than take the trouble to examine religious texts in their context, prefer to take the texts as coming directly from God. This gives the text a divine and unalterable aura. It might appear to offer more security, 'knowing' what God is revealing without having to take the trouble to check our thinking. It is certainly easier not to have to work to discover what the human author intended to say, and how the text was understood by those to whom it was first addressed. Security, ease, and power can be very tempting. We would do well to listen to Jesus as he tells us: 'the truth will set you free' (John 8:43).

Islamic scholars accept the Qur'an as a gift directly from God. Muhammad is seen as a pure medium, who adds nothing of his own that could obscure the pure light of Divine revelation. Jelal al-Din al-Rumi, a thirteenth century Sufi saint, has this to say about how we should approach the Qur'an:

'The Qur'an is like a shy bride. Although you pull aside her veil, she will not show you her face. The reason you have no pleasure or discovery in all your study of it is that it rejects your attempt to pull off its veil. It tricks you and shows itself to you as ugly, as if to say, "I am not that beauty." It is capable of showing any face it wants. If, on the other hand, you do not tug at the veil, but you acquiesce, give water to its sown field, do it service from afar, and try to do what pleases it without pulling at its veil, it will show you its face. "Seek the people of God, enter among my servants; and enter my paradise" [Surah 89:29-30]. God does not speak to just anyone, as kings in this world do not speak to every weaver. They appoint viziers and deputies through whom people can reach them. So also has God selected a certain servant to the end that whoever seeks God can find Him through that servant. All the prophets have come for the sole reason that they are the way.' (*Fihi ma fihi, Discourse 8*).

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (the General Editor of *The Study Qûran*), in his *Ideals and Realities of Islam* 1966, has this to say on the purity of Muhammad:

'The Word of God in Islam is the Qur'an; in Christianity it is Christ. The vehicle of the Divine Message in Christianity is the Virgin Mary; in Islam it is the soul of the Prophet. The Prophet must be unlettered for the same reason that the Virgin Mary must be a virgin. The human vehicle of a Divine Message must be pure and untainted. The Divine Word can be written only on the pure and "untouched" tablet of human receptivity. If this Word is in the form of flesh the purity is symbolised by the virginity of the mother

who gives birth to the Word, and if it is in the form of a book this purity is symbolised by the unlettered nature of the person who is chosen to announce the Word among men ... The unlettered nature of the Prophet demonstrates how the human recipient is completely passive before the Divine. Were this purity and virginity of the soul not to exist, the Divine Word would in a sense become tainted with purely human knowledge and not be presented to mankind in its pristine purity.'

Kabir Helminski, author of *"The Knowing Heart; a Sufi Path of Transformation"* (1999) reverences the Qur'an as Divine Revelation, a pure guide to the Truth, and sees Muhammad as a saint. His quotes from the Qur'an are mostly short phrases. He quotes also from the Hadith and the saints of the Muslim faith, especially Rumi. However, he does not address the aspects of the Qur'an that I find understandable coming from Muhammad, but troublesome if judged to come directly from God. It may, of course, be that I have failed Rumi's test. If so, I hope that someone would explain to me the meaning of the statements of the Qur'an that seem to me to reflect the limited understanding of Muhammad's culture, but fail to reveal the God that Helminski loves.

According to Helminski one way of looking at the Qur'an is as an 'upflowing of meaning from the purest depths of the unconscious' (page 61). As we will see there are many very beautiful statements in the Qur'an. If this were not the case Islam would not be still nourishing people who are searching for truth and love; Islam would not still be producing saints. But I will be quoting from the Qur'an sentiments that do not appear to me to come 'from the purest depths.' Helminski claims that 'abusive conduct was never the method of Muhammad' (page 138). Is this true? He claims that 'Qur'anic revelation is a pure inexhaustible spring of wisdom and guidance' (page 162). Of course, there is much wisdom and guidance, but is it all pure? Speaking of the amazing spread of Islam, Helminski states: "The Qur'an and the prophet magnetized a backward and feuding people until their spiritual conviction and commitment to social justice spread throughout the known world in little more than a century' (page 163). This is putting an extraordinarily rosy view of the spread of Islam!

Helminski claims that 'the Qur'an is a book without internal contradiction' (page 164). Is this true? The Qur'an itself has no problem with contradictions in the text. God is free, and God can reveal one thing and then reveal something that contradicts it. God is not bound by our human logic.

'No sign do We [that is 'God'] abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but that We bring that which is better than it or like unto it. Do you not know that God is Powerful over all things?' (Sûrah 2:106, from Medina).

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

The problem with the principle of abrogation (*al-nasikh wa-l-mansukh*) is finding criteria to establish which sūrah have been abrogated. This means, for example, that some opt for the more peaceful sūrahs, revealed in the early years of Islam while Muhammad was still living in Mecca, but have to allow that the more aggressive sūrahs, which were revealed in Medina, in the last ten years of Muhammad's life, are not ruled out by the Qur'an. Others opt for the more aggressive sūrahs, but have to allow that the more tolerant sūrahs are not ruled out by the Qur'an. The problem is increased when we look at the hadith, which are littered with contradictory statements claiming to come from Muhammad.

If the understanding of revelation that I am proposing has value, the explanation of the contradictions is to be sought, not by asserting that God is above logic and is free to replace one revelation with a contradictory one, but by focusing on the changed circumstances within which Muhammad received the revelations. Any revelation is received by a human being, who grasps it and expresses it according to circumstances of time and place and situation.

A major problem in Christian-Muslim dialogue is that Christians hold that, while reason and logic cannot comprehend reality, they must be respected. Revelation goes beyond reason, but cannot contradict reason. Muslims see the Qur'an as an expression of God's will. Reason and logic must give way.

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

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

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

Different traditional schools of Islamic wisdom speak of reading the Qur'an in a non-literal sense, looking for a deeper meaning in the text. Muhyiddin ibn Arabi 'explained that just as water necessarily reflects the colour of its container, so theophanies are conditioned by the container that receives them and whose form they take on' (quoted by Husain page 243). However, such thinking appears powerless against those who, like the Salafi and Wahhabi

jihadis, choose to read the Qur'an literally, and insist that other Muslims who do not follow them are infidels.

9. Texts that are sometimes interpreted as forbidding Muslims to obey a government other than a Muslim one.

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

Sûrah 4:89 *'Do not take disbelievers as protectors (awliya') till they migrate in the way of God. But if they turn their backs, then seize them and slay them wherever you find them.'*(from Medina)

Sûrah 5:51, 55 *'O you who believe! Take not the Jews and Christians as protectors (awliya'). They are the protectors of one another. And whosoever takes them as protectors, surely he is of them ... Your protector is only God and His Messenger, and those who believe, who perform the prayer and give alms while bowing down.'* (from Medina)

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

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

Sûrah 2:222-243 looks at some aspects of the relationship between husbands and wives. It includes the statement: *"Men have a degree over women"* (2:228, from Medina). This view was prevalent in seventh century tribal Arabia, as in other places then and since. But are we to believe that this is God's specific instruction? Along the same line, the Qur'an's instructions in Sûrah 4 concerning heritage favour the male: *'unto the male a share equal to that of two females'* (verse 11). In Sûrah 4:34 we read: *'Men are the upholders and maintainers of women, by virtue of that in which God has favoured some of them above others.'* It gets stronger: *'As for those women from whom you fear discord and animosity, admonish them, then leave them in their beds, then strike them'* (from Medina). Such statements are perhaps understandable when we look at the prevailing culture in seventh century Arabia (and in other cultures then and since). It is another matter to read them as expressions of God's will.

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

Muhammad is given permission to have as many wives as he wants. Are we to take this as a literal instruction from God, or should we understand as Muhammad's understanding of what God permitted him?

It is difficult not to have the same doubts about Sûrah 66 (from Medina): *'O Prophet! Why dost thou forbid that which God has made lawful unto thee, seeking the good pleasure of thy wives? And God is Forgiving, Merciful. God has already ordained for you the absolution of your oaths, and God is your Master. He is the Knower, the Wise'* (verses 1-2).

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

God assures Muhammad that he does not have to keep the oath he swore to his wife, since God has declared that it is lawful for him to be intimate with Mariyah! Is this God speaking?

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

'Truly, the reverent are in a station secure amid gardens and springs, wearing fine silk and rich brocade, facing one another. Thus it is. And we shall wed them to wide-eyed [others translate 'black-eyed'] maidens' (Sûrah 44:52-54) (?).

'Truly, the reverent shall be in gardens of bliss, rejoicing in what their Lord has given them. And their Lord has shielded them from the punishment of Hellfire: "Eat and drink in enjoyment for that which you used to do," reclining upon couches arrayed, and we shall wed them to wide-eyed maidens' (Sûrah 52:18-20, from Mecca).

'They recline upon beds lined with rich brocade, the fruits of the two Gardens near at hand. So which of your Lord's boons do you two deny? [This is a refrain in this surah. It is addressed to both human beings and jinns]. Therein are maidens of modest gaze, whom neither man nor jinn has ever touched' (Sûrah 55:54-56), *'good and beautiful ones'* (55:70), *'maidens secluded in pavilions'* (55:72), *'untouched as yet by man or jinn'* (55:74). *'They recline upon green cushions and beautiful wonders'* (55:76).

'There shall be wide-eyed maidens' (Sûrah 56:22).

'Truly, the reverent shall have a place of triumph, gardens and vineyards, buxom maidens of like age' (Sûrah 78:33).

It is one thing to read these statements from within the patriarchal culture of seventh century Arabia. It is another to read them as divine revelation.

Tragically, seeing women as subordinate to men is found in almost all cultures. In spite of the teaching and example of Jesus, Christians, like other religious communities, have been slow to recognise the complementary equality between men and women. We have even managed to construe parts of our sacred writings to support the subjection of women.

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

11. Paradise

When the Qur'an speaks of heaven it is not speaking of communion with God, as we Christians do. It is speaking of '*Gardens of bliss in the presence of their Lord*' (Sûrah 68:34, from Mecca).

Furthermore, in its descriptions of paradise always speaks from the male point of view. The joys of heaven include '*maidens of modest gaze, of like age*' (Sûrah 38:52).

'Truly, the reverend are in a station secure amid gardens and springs, wearing fine silk and rich brocade, facing one another. Thus it is. And we shall wed them to wide-eyed [others translate 'black-eyed'] maidens' (Sûrah 44:52-54).

'Truly, the reverent shall be in gardens of bliss, rejoicing in what their Lord has given them. And their Lord has shielded them from the punishment of Hellfire: "Eat and drink in enjoyment for that which you used to do," reclining upon couches arrayed, and we shall wed them to wide-eyed maidens' (Sûrah 52:18-20).

'They recline upon beds lined with rich brocade, the fruits of the two Gardens near at hand. So which of your Lord's boons do you two deny? [This is a refrain in this surah. It is addressed to both human beings and jinns]. Therein are maidens of modest gaze, whom neither man nor jinn has ever touched' (Sûrah 55:54-56), '*good and beautiful ones*' (55:70), '*maidens secluded in pavilions*' (55:72), '*untouched as yet by man or jinn*' (55:74). '*They recline upon green cushions and beautiful wonders*' (55:76).

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It is one thing to read these statements from within the patriarchal culture of seventh century Arabia. It is another to read them as divine revelation.

12. Hell

The Qur'an frequently refers to God's ultimate judgment. Sûrah 1 speaks of God as 'Master of the Day of Judgment': the believers (those who submit to and those who claim to be Muslims but are hypocrites the revelations given by God through Muhammad) are destined for heaven, the disbelievers, that is all Jews, Christians and other non-Muslims, are destined for hell.

'As for those who disbelieve, garments of fire shall be cut for them, and boiling liquid shall be poured over their heads, by which their innards and their skin will be melted' (Sûrah 22:19-20, from Medina).

Muhammad is very conscious of his role as one who warns. He objects to those who see him only as one who warns (Sûrah 11:12), but it remains true that warning features frequently in the sûrahs. The Qur'an defines his mission as '*a warner and a bearer of good tidings*' (sûrahs 6:48; 7:188; 11:2; 17:105; 46:1). In this he sees himself as carrying on the mission of earlier prophets whose mission is described in the same terms (sûrahs 4:165; 6:48; 18:56). *The Study Quran* states in the commentary on Sûrah 50, verse 28: "Some read threat here as a reference to the Qur'an, since to warn people of the impending punishment is considered a function of all revelation and is a central theme of the Qur'an' (page 1269, column 1).

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

'Warning' and 'Hell' have a huge role in the Qur'an.

Hell is the fate of 'disbelievers': those who do not submit to the revelations that God gives to Muhammad, and do not accept Muhammad as God's Messenger. Sûrah 3:10 (from Medina) is one of many texts that state that disbelievers '*shall be fuel for the Fire*'. Religious groups of all kinds over the centuries have sometimes behaved as though only those who belong to their religion will be saved. If we reflect on the cultural situation in Arabia in the seventh century, such a statement is perhaps understandable, but as a statement from God? It is true that some people who claim to be Christians have spoken in similar ways. The difference is that Christians cannot claim Jesus to support their view.

Christians are at one with the Qur'an when it states: '*God guides to Himself whoever turns in repentance*' (Sûrah 13:17) (?), because '*God does not wrong human beings in the least, but*

rather human beings wrong themselves' (Sûrah 10:44, from Mecca). However, Muhammad understood that the only way for people to avoid this fate was to surrender to God's will by accepting the revelation given them through Moses, through Jesus, and, finally, through the revelations given through Muhammad.

By contrast, 'hell' is mentioned only once in the Gospel of Mark (see Mark 9:43-47); four times in the Gospel of Matthew (see Matthew 5:22-30; 10:28; 18:9 and 23:15,33); once in Luke (see Luke 12:5); once in the Letter of James (see James 3:6), and once in the Second Letter of Peter (see 2 Peter 2:4). Jesus insists on the importance of the decisions we make. We will be judged by how we live, and to obstinately refuse God's invitation to love is to choose to exist cut off from God. Such an existence is 'hell'.

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

This constant and compassionate love is beautifully expressed in the story Jesus told of the father (God) who respects the choices his two sons make, and is always ready to reach out to them and welcome them home (see Luke 15:11-32).

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

There are texts in the Qur'an that allow some to claim that it is God's will to use force to defend and propagate religion. The word most non-Muslims are familiar with is the noun 'jihad' (from the Arabic root, j-h-d) – perhaps best translated as 'striving'.

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

For Muhammad, Abraham was the first Muslim, the first to submit to the will of the One God. All who share Abraham's faith are true Muslims. Muhammad sees this especially in Moses

and Jesus and those who follow them faithfully. Muhammad sees himself, not as revealing a new religion, but as calling everyone to strive to be faithful followers of Abraham.

'Strive for God as He should be striven for. He has chosen [for] you – and has placed no hardship for you in the religion – the creed of your father, Abraham. He named you muslims aforetime, and herein, that the Messenger may be a witness for you, and that you may be witnesses for mankind. So perform the prayer and give the alms, and hold fast to God. He is your Master, and how excellent a Master, and how excellent a Helper' (Sûrah 22 verse 78 (?)).

'Strive in God's way so that haply you may prosper' (Sûrah 5:35, from Medina).

The problem is that in the Qur'an (especially in the Medina sûrahs) 'striving in God's way' (*jihad fi sabil Allah*) normally means waging war to defend, but also to propagate Islam. 'Waging war' is part of 'God's way.'

'O Prophet! Strive against the disbelievers and the hypocrites, and be harsh with them. Their refuge is Hell' (Sûrah 9:73, from Medina; repeated in Sûrah 66:9, also Medina).

'Those who were left behind exulted in staying back, opposing the Messenger of God and were averse to striving with their wealth and with their selves in the way of God. And they said "Go not forth in the heat." Say "The fire of Hell is of a heat more intense' (Sûrah 9:81, from Medina).

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

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

Many texts speak of the use of force, without using the word '*jihad*'. Sometimes the focus is on defence:

'Fight in the way of God against those who fight against you, but do not transgress' (Sûrah 2:190, from Medina).

'Permission is granted to those who are fought, because they have been wronged – and truly God is able to help them – who were expelled from their homes without right, only for

saying, "Our Lord is God". Were it not for God repelling people, some by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques, wherein God's name is mentioned much, would have been destroyed. And God will surely help those who help Him – truly God is Strong, Mighty' (Sûrah 22:39-40, ?).

Waging war is not restricted to defence.

'Those who believe fight in the way of God, and those who disbelieve fight in the way of false deities. Fight, therefore, against the allies of Satan' (Sûrah 4:76, from Medina).

'Fight in the way of God. Thou art accountable only for thyself, and urge on the believers. It may be that God will restrain the might of the disbelievers, for God is stronger in might and more severe in punishment' (Sûrah 4:84, from Medina).

'If the disbelievers turn their backs, then seize them and slay them wherever you find them, and take no protector or helper from among them' (Sûrah 4:89, from Medina).

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

'I shall cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieve. So strike above the neck, and strike their every fingertip' (Sûrah 8: 12, from Medina).

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

'Fight them until there is no strife, and religion is wholly for God' (Sûrah 8:39, from Medina).

'It is not for a prophet to take captives until he overwhelms his enemy in the land' (Sûrah 8:67, from Medina).

'When the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wheresoever you find them, besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every ambush. But if they repent, and perform the prayer and give the alms, then let them go their way. Truly God is Forgiving, Merciful' (Sûrah 9:5, from Medina).

'Fight those who believe not in God and in the Last Day, and who do not forbid what God and his Messenger have forbidden, and who follow not the Religion of Truth among those who were given the Book, till they pay the jizyah (the tax) with a willing hand, being humbled' (Sûrah 9:29, from Medina).

To fulfil the mission given him by God, Muhammad felt obliged to spread belief by force of arms: 'to make the Religion of Truth prevail over all religion' (Sûrah 9:33, from Medina).

'When you meet those who disbelieve, strike at their necks; then, when you have overwhelmed them, tighten the bonds. Then free them graciously or hold them for ransom, till war lays down its burdens. Thus [shall it be]' (Sûrah 47:4, from Medina).

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

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, a more thorough treatment would involve a comparison of the Qur'an and the Hebrew Scriptures. Especially in the presentation of God as a warrior God and in the use of violence there are similarities, for comparisons can be drawn between the tribal customs of Arabia and the tribal customs of Ancient Israel. Today scholars of the Hebrew Scriptures read the call to violence in the context in which the Scriptures were written. As we have seen there are Muslims who would like to read the Qur'an in the same way. Violence is seen as the expression, not of God's will, but of the limited understanding of the time.

The Qur'an assumes that the enemies of the Muslims are God's enemies:

'Whosoever is an enemy of God, His angels and His messengers, and Gabriel and Michael: God is indeed the enemy of the disbelievers' (Sûrah 2:98, from Medina).

'Prepare for them what you can of strength of arms and horses tethered for battle, frightening thereby the enemy of God, and your enemy' (Sûrah 8:60, from Medina).

'O you who believe! Take not Mine enemy and your enemy as friends' (Sûrah 60:1, from Medina).

At times the Ancient Israelites shared this assumption, an assumption that Jesus rejected, as we saw on page 15 (Matthew 5:43-48).

Paul writes: 'If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink' (Romans 12:20).

Jesus had a different teaching because he had a different notion of God. I am not claiming that people do not have a right to defend themselves against aggression. Nor am I denying that people and states have failed to obey Jesus, and have, in his name, indulged in aggression to further their own interests. What I am claiming is that when Christians behave in this way we cannot quote our sacred Scriptures in support of our behaviour.

The early histories of the spread of the Christian religion and the Muslim religion are very different. From the beginning Islam has included a political component. Force was used first of all to get what was needed to support the Muslim community. Such was a common practice in tribal Arabia. It was used also against those who resisted Islam, and, when the Muslim community was strong enough, force was used to spread Islam. Muhammad himself took part in 27 raids between his arrival at Medina and his death. By contrast, for the first three hundred years Christians had no defence against those who tried to crush them, and

the spread of Christianity resulted from its commitment to love and the meaning that people found in it. When, in the fourth century, Christianity was established as the official religion of the Roman State the state continued to use force to strengthen its hold on power. When such force was used it was in the interest of the state, not of Christianity, and was a failure to obey the revelation that is at the heart of the Christian way of life.

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

The Study Quran quotes the following hadith (page 1808). Muhammad is quoted as saying:

'I have been commanded to fight the people until they bear witness that there is no god but God and Muhammad is God's Messenger, perform the prayer and pay the alms. When they have done this, their blood and property are safe from me, except for what Islamic law requires, and then the reckoning is up to God.'

There are hundreds of thousands of hadith – statements that are claimed to come from Muhammad, but are not in the Qur'an. Many of them are contradictory, and there are no established criteria for testing their claim to come from Muhammad.

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

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

14. Care for the poor

Another central thrust of the Qur'an is God's will that we care for the poor. Muhammad was orphaned as a child, an experience that remained with him all his life

'By the morning brightness, and by the night when still, your Lord has not forsaken you; nor does He despise. And the Hereafter shall be better for you than this life. And surely your Lord will give to you, and you will be content. Did He not find you [that is Muhammad] an orphan and shelter you, find you astray and guide you, and find you in need and enrich you? So as for the orphan, scorn not. And as for one who requests, repel not. And for the Blessing of the Lord, proclaim' (Surah 93, from Mecca).

Sûrah 89:17-19 speaks of the fate of those *'who honour not the orphan, nor urge you the feeding of the indigent. You devour inheritance with rapacious devouring, and love wealth with abounding love'* (?).

We find the same theme in other sûrahs:

'The steep pass is the freeing of a slave, or giving food at a time of famine to an orphan near of kin, or an indigent, clinging to the dust, while being one of those who believe and exhort one another to patience, and exhort one another to compassion. Those are the companions of the right. And those who disbelieve in Our signs, they are the companions of the left. Upon them is Fire enclosed' (Sûrah 90:13-20) (?).

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

The Sûrahs

Here I look at each of the sûrahs of the Qur'an in turn. However it is beyond the scope of this paper to quote the entire text of the Qur'an. I quote only a selection of the verses that seem to me to highlight the similarities and the differences between the Qur'an and the New Testament. When the surah is quoted in full, as for example Sûrah 1 below, this will be noted. When a theme is present that has already been treated, I will refer back to it.

Sûrah 1 Fatiḥah (The Opening) (from Mecca) quoted in full

'In the name of God (the basmalah), the Compassionate [Ar-Raḥmân], the Merciful [Ar-Raḥîm]. Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds, the Compassionate, the Merciful, Master of the Day of Judgment. Thee we worship, and from Thee we seek help. Guide us upon the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not of those who incur wrath, nor of those who are astray.'

1. The Compassionate, the Merciful

Compassion and Mercy are frequently attributed to God in the Qur'an. They are also key attributes of God as portrayed in the Christian Scriptures.

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

For Christians we know that God is compassionate and merciful because we see Jesus being compassionate and merciful. 'A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you want to, you can make me clean." Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "Of course I want to. Be made clean!" (Mark 1:40-41). 'Jesus saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things' (Mark 6:34). 'When there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, "I have compassion for the crowd' (Mark 8:1). 'When the Lord saw the widow, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!' (Luke 7:13-14).

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

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

We believe that Jesus gives us a share in his compassion, the compassion of God. Paul writes: 'God is my witness how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus' (1:8). See also Philippians 2:1-5, quoted on page 20. 'As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion' (Colossians 3:12).

The Qur'an assures us that God is compassionate. In the New Testament we see what this means by watching God's compassion stirring the heart of Jesus.

2. Praise and worship

Sûrah 1 '*Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds ... Thee we worship.*'

Jesus addresses God in prayer as 'Father, Lord of heaven and earth' (Luke 10:21). We Christians are called to 'worship the Lord your God, and serve only him' (Luke 4:8).

3. Prayer for God's guidance

Sûrah 1 '*Guide us upon the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed.*'

For Christians it is Jesus who shares with us his intimate communion with God, and who walks with us, for he is himself 'the Way, the Truth and the Life' (John 14:6).

Sûrah 2 (from Medina).

This is the longest sûrah in the Qur'an. Verses 6 to 20 are a sustained warning against 'hypocrites': those who pretend to believe, but fail to submit to God's will as revealed to Muhammad.

There are many references to the Hebrew Scriptures, including the narrative of creation and the sin of our first parents (verses 29ff), the escape from Egypt (verses 49ff), and the journey through the desert when the unfaithful worshipped a calf (verse 54).

Much of this sûrah echoes the ancient prophets of Israel, who criticised the failure of the people to obey God's revealed will. Muhammad is presented as the ultimate prophet and his words as God's ultimate revelation. It warns of the dire consequences that will befall those who do not submit to God by following the Qur'an.

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

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

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

The Sabaeans no longer exist. Such positive statements about Christians are typically found in Muhammad's period in Mecca.

The New Testament, too, speaks of 'reward': 'Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven' (Matthew 5:12). The present reward is expressed by Paul: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.' Of the reward in heaven Paul writes: 'no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him' (1 Corinthians 2:9). The reward is to be with the Risen Jesus in the embrace of God.

Sûrah 2:87 'Indeed We gave unto Moses the Book and caused a succession of messengers to follow after him. And We gave Jesus, son of Mary, clear proofs, and strengthened him with the Holy Spirit.'

Christians believe that everything, insofar as it is free from sin, reveals God: creation itself, and the life and writings of holy people in every culture. Christians believe that God revealed God's Self and God's will through Moses, and through the other prophets of Israel. We believe that God's Self-revelation reached its fullest expression in Jesus of Nazareth. This belief differs from the faith of Muslims, who recognise Moses and Jesus, but for whom Muhammad is the Messenger who reveals God's will in its fullness. But this difference need not stop Muslims and Christians listening to each other, respecting each other and recognising the values that we share. By the term 'Holy Spirit' we mean the love-communion that united Jesus to God. The Christian life is a sharing in this love-communion.

Sûrah 2:98 *'Whosoever is an enemy of God, His angels and His messengers, and Gabriel and Michael: God is indeed the enemy of the disbelievers.'*

Jesus revealed that we are free to reject God's offer of grace, but, as we demonstrated on page 15, for Jesus God does not have enemies. On the contrary God continues to love and grace everyone – and we should do the same.

Sûrah 2:106 *'No sign do We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but that We bring that which is better than it or like unto it. Dost thou not know that God is Powerful over all things?'*

We studied this text and others like it on page 24. It is not surprising that Muhammad would have responded differently to inspiration as circumstances changed. The problem arises by claiming the Qur'an as directly coming from God.

Sûrah 2:115 *'Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God.'*

We Christians believe that all creation reveals something of the Creator, that 'wherever you turn, there is the Face of God.'

For us Jesus is God's most beautiful human revelation, so we look to Jesus, especially, to see the 'Face' of God. Paul writes: 'It is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Sûrah 2:136 *'We believe in God, and in that which was sent down to us, and in that which was sent down unto Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and in what Moses and Jesus were given, and in what the prophets were given from their Lord. We make no distinction among any of them, and unto Him we submit.'*

Christians are at home with this statement of belief, except for the fact that we see Jesus as the ultimate and perfect human revelation of God. We believe that he is God's focal Word.

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

Christians share the Muslim concern for the poor. We looked at this on page 34.

Sûrah 2:190-191 'Fight in the way of God against those who fight against you, but do not transgress. Truly God loves not the transgressors. And slay them wherever you come upon them.'

We examined the teaching of the Qur'an that authorises the use of force in defending and propagating religion on pages 30-34.

This sûrah goes on to speak of family relationships, of contracts, of prayer, fasting (verses 183-187), almsgiving, pilgrimage (verse 196ff), and other matters. Verses 222-243 focus on the relationship between husbands and wives. It includes the statement: *"Men are a degree above women."* We examined the teaching of the Qur'an in regard to the relationship between man and woman on page 26.

Sûrah 2:256-257 'There is no coercion in religion ... God is the Protector of those who believe. He brings them out of the darkness into the light. As for those who disbelieve, their protectors are the idols, bringing them out of the light into the darkness. They are the inhabitants of the Fire, abiding therein.'

There are many statements in the Qur'an that are used to support those who exert 'coercion in religion!' These verses are addressed to Muslims, inviting them to embrace Islam willingly (see Sûrah 22:78). By contrast non-Muslims (disbelievers) are in darkness and are headed for the eternal Hell of divine punishment. For the implications of this see the Islamic and the Christian ideas about hell on pages 32-33.

Sûrah 2:263-264 'An honourable word and forgiveness are better than an act of charity followed by injury. God is Self-Sufficient, Clement. O you who believe! Do not annul your acts of charity through preening and injury, like the person who spends his wealth to be seen by men and believes not in God and the Last Day.'

Elements of this good advice are found in the words of Jesus: 'Whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you' (Matthew 6:2-4).

Sûrah 2:286 concludes the sûrah with the prayer: 'Our Lord, impose not upon us that which we have not the strength to bear! And pardon us, forgive us and have mercy on us. You are our Master, so help us against the disbelieving people.'

Compare Paul's statement: *'God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it'* (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Sûrah 3 (from Medina; though see verse 199).

Sûrah 3:2-4 'God, there is no God but He, the Living, the Self-Subsisting. He sent down the Book upon thee in truth, confirming what was before it, and He sent down the Torah and the Gospel,

aforetime as a guidance to mankind. And He sent down the Criterion [that which enables us to discern truth from error?].'

Muslim scholars think of the Qur'an as existing from eternity in heaven. God revealed it by causing it to come down upon Muhammad.

Sûrah 3:10 *'As for those who disbelieve, neither their wealth nor their children will avail them aught against God. And it is they who shall be fuel for the Fire.'*

This expresses a theme that recurs throughout the Qur'an: those who disbelieve in God as presented in the Qur'an, and in Muhammad his Messenger will be fuel for the fire of hell (see pages 28-30 for a comment on hell in the Qur'an). Religious groups of all kinds over the centuries have sometimes behaved as though only those who belong to their religion will be saved. To find this expressed in the Qur'an is understandable in seventh century Arabia, but for any religious group to make such a claim is to fail to know God.

Sûrah 3:19 *'Truly, the religion in the sight of God is submission (Al-Islam).'*

The word 'Islam' comes from *islama*, meaning 'submission'. Submission to God is central to Islam. For Christians, too, obedience to God is central. The word 'obedience' is important. Its roots are in the Latin language. Being obedient means 'listening' (Latin *audiens*) from close contact (Latin *ob*). The Hebrew and Greek words for obedience also focus on listening.

See the quotes from the Gospel of John which speak of Jesus' obedience (pages 16-17). Obedience is due to God who reveals God's Self in a multitude of mysterious ways – for Christians, most significantly in Jesus.

Sûrah 3:31-32 *'Say: "If you love God, follow me, and God will love you and forgive you your sins. And God is Forgiving, Merciful". Say: "Obey God and obey the Messenger." If they turn away, truly God loves not the disbelievers.'*

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

Sûrah 3:35-36 *'The wife of 'Imran [Mary's father] said: "My Lord! I have borne a female ... and I have named her Mary, and I seek refuge for her in You and for her progeny, from Satan the outcast".'*

Sûrah 3:45 *'The angels said, "O Mary, truly God gives you glad tidings of a Word from Him whose name is the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, high honoured in this world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought nigh".'*

The Gospels do not mention Mary's parents. Luke recounts the conception of Jesus in a scene in which God sends the angel Gabriel to say to Mary:

"Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." We are told that Mary 'was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High ...". Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God" (Luke 1:28-35).

Sûrah 3:84 *'We believe in God and what has been sent down upon us, and in what was sent down upon Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and in what Moses, Jesus and the prophets were given from their Lord. We make no distinction among any of them, and unto Him we submit.*

The sûrah goes on to describe the punishment in store for those who believe and then abandon their belief. It makes an exception for *'those who repent and make amends, for truly God is Forgiving, Merciful'* (Sûrah 3:89).

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

'Forgiving' and 'Merciful' are among the many *'Beautiful Names'* (Sûrah 7:180) given to God in the Qur'an.

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

Paul prays:

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

As God forgives us, we are called to forgive one another. On one occasion Peter asked Jesus should he forgive as much as seven times. Jesus replied: 'not seven times, but seventy times

seven times' (Matthew 18:21). 'Whenever you stand praying, forgive if you have anything against anyone' (Mark 11:25). We are to forgive 'from the heart' (Matthew 18:35).

Sûrah 3 records a number of early significant battles involving Muhammad and his followers. The Muslims are not to lose heart for *'If you are slain or die, truly unto God you shall be gathered ... Truly God loves those who trust' ... Deem not those who slain in the way of God to be dead. Rather they are alive with their Lord'* (verses 158-159 and 169).

Insofar as this is speaking of Muslims killed because of their faith, it would be the same as Christian teaching about martyrdom. Paul, facing death, could pray: 'I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him' (2 Timothy 1:12). Peter writes: 'Through Jesus you have come to trust in God, who raised Jesus from the dead and have him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God' (1 Peter 1:21).

However, *'the way of God'* in the Qur'an can be interpreted as including the use of violence to propagate Islam and eliminate disbelievers. To call dying in this cause 'martyrdom' is problematic.

Sûrah 3:191 Speaks of those *'who remember God standing, sitting and lying on their sides.'*

Sûrah 3:199 *'Among the People of the Book are those who believe in God and that which has been sent down to you, and that which has been sent down to them, humble before God ... It is they who shall have their reward with their Lord.'*

Some Muslim commentators understand this as referring to Christians who, while remaining Christians, respect the revelation given to Muhammad. *The Study Quran* suggests that it may have been occasioned by 'the death of the Christian king of Abyssinia who provided asylum for believers from Mecca before the migration to Medina' (page 186 column 1).

Sûrah 4 (from Medina).

This section speaks of 'hypocrites': those who converted to Islam and then reverted to paganism. It deals also with relations between men and women.

Sûrah 4:3 *'If you fear that you will not deal fairly with the orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you, two, three or four.'*

Polygamy was practised among the pagan Arabian tribes. Many of Muhammad's followers were killed in the battle against his own tribe at Mecca. In the battle of Uhud, Muhammad himself was injured. Muhammad is concerned for the children who have lost their fathers, and here suggests that the Muslim men take a number of wives, and in this way provide the wives and the children with protection.

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

Sûrah 4:11 *'God enjoins upon you concerning your children: to the male a share equal to that of two females.'*

Sûrah 4:34 *'Men are the upholders and maintainers of women by virtue of that in which God has favoured some of them above others and by virtue of their spending from their wealth. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in ['their husband's'] absence what God has guarded. As for those from whom you fear discord and animosity, admonish them, then leave them in their beds, then strike them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Truly God is Exalted, Great.'*

These are examples of the inequality between male and female in the Qur'an. See the reflection on pages 25-26. It is one thing to see this in light of Arabian Bedouin customs in the seventh century. It is another to take these statements as expressions of God's will.

Sûrah 4:36 *'Worship God, and ascribe not partners to Him.'*

Muhammad has in mind especially the pagan Arabs and their many gods. As explained on pages 14ff, Christians need to express our faith in the One God in language that assures Muslims that monotheism among Christians is not compromised.

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

On page 34 we looked at the admirable concern of the Qur'an for the poor – a concern that is central, also, to Christians.

Sûrah 4:74-76 *'Let them fight in the way of God those who would sell the life of this world for the Hereafter. And whosoever fights in the way of God – whether he is slain or victorious – We shall grant him a great reward. And what ails you that you do not fight in the way of God, and for the weak and oppressed – men, women and children – who cry out, "Our Lord! Bring us forth from this town whose people are oppressors, and appoint for us from You a protector, and appoint for us from You a helper." Those who believe fight in the way of God, and those who disbelieve fight in the way of false deities. Fight, therefore, against the allies of Satan.'*

Sûrah 4:82 *'Do they not contemplate the Qur'an? Had it been from other than God, they would surely have found much discrepancy therein.'*

Sûrah 4:89 *'If they turn their backs, then seize them and slay them wherever you find them, and take no protector or helper from among them.'*

Sûrah 4:92-93 *'It is not for a believer to slay a believer unless it be in error ... Whoever slays a believer wilfully, his recompense is Hell, forever'*.

On pages 30-34 we offered a lengthy treatment of the Qur'an's giving divine authorisation for the use of violence to defend and propagate the Muslim religion. Jesus commanded us to love everyone, including those we call our enemies. His command was a consequence of his understanding of God (see Matthew 5:43-48). In the past, and still today, many Christians

fail to live up to the teaching of Jesus. But his words are there to haunt us. When we fail to love our enemies, we are failing to follow his clear teaching.

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

Sûrah 4:110 'Whoever does evil or wrongs himself, and then seeks forgiveness of God, he will find God Forgiving, Merciful.'

Christians are at home with this statement of belief. For a reflection of forgiveness and mercy see the commentary on Sûrah 3:89 (page 41).

Sûrah 4:140 'Truly God will gather the hypocrites and the disbelievers in Hell, all together.'

'Hypocrites' are those who converted to Islam and then went back to paganism. 'Disbelievers' are all non-Muslims.

See the reflection on hell on page 29-30. Christians believe that the punishment of hell exists for those who obstinately and stubbornly close themselves off from God. We are not asked to believe that anyone has done this and are required to resist the temptation to sit in judgment on others. 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven' (Luke 6:37).

Sûrah 4: 157-158 'The Jews say: "We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the messenger of God" though they did not slay him, nor did they crucify him, though it seemed so to them... but God raised him up unto Himself.'

We examined this on page 12 as an example of the Qur'an's misunderstanding of Christian teaching. The idea that Jesus did not really die is found in some Gnostic sources (eg Valentinus who died in Cyprus in 160AD).

Sûrah 4:171 'O People of the Book! Do not exaggerate in your religion, nor utter anything concerning God save the truth. Verily the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of God, and his Word, which He committed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers, and say not "Three." Refrain! It is better for you. God is only one God.'

On pages 14ff we reflected on the Christian understanding of the relationship between Jesus and God. It is Christian belief that Jesus revealed God's Word beautifully and perfectly in his person, because he remained open in purity to the gift of God's Spirit embracing him in love. As Jesus said: 'I am never alone, because I always do what pleases my Father' (John 8:29). Jesus is not a second God. We do not know what exaggerations Muhammad's Christian contemporaries in Arabia may have indulged in. As mentioned earlier, it was and remains a tragedy that Muhammad was not aware of the beauty of the authentic Christian teaching of the Trinity. Like the Muslims, Christians are committed to the belief that '*God is only one God.*'

Sûrah 5 (from Medina).

This section has a lot to say about the kinds of food it is permitted to eat. We find similar instructions in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Christian New Testament is very different: 'Jesus called the crowd and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile ... since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) It is what comes out of a person that defiles' (Mark 7:14-20).

Sûrah 5 speaks, too, of the importance of ritual cleansing and of the pilgrimage to the Ka'bah in Mecca. The Ka'bah is the 'Cube', the square shaped building containing the large black stone which is revered by pilgrims during the Hajj. The practice pre-dates Islam. This pilgrimage is one of the five pillars of Islam (see page 14).

Sûrah 5:3 *'This day I have perfected for you your religion, and completed My Blessing upon you, and have approved for you as religion, Submission [Islam].'*

This is thought by some to be Muhammad's final revelation, March 632, on the occasion of his last pilgrimage to Mecca. Muhammad died on 8th June 632.

Sûrah 5:5 allows Muslims to enter into a marriage with *'the chaste women of those who were given the Book before you'* (this includes Christian women).

Sûrah 5:17 explicitly includes Christians among the disbelievers. *'They indeed have disbelieved who say, "God is the Messiah, son of Mary".'*

Muhammad respects Jesus, but only as a messenger.

Sûrah 5:19 *'O people of the Book! Our Messenger has come to you, making things clear after an interval [in the series] of messengers.'*

Muslims see Muhammad as God's final messenger, the 'seal of the prophets (33.40). Christians see Jesus as God's perfect human revelation. The difference is fundamental.

Sûrah 5:32 *'We prescribed for the children of Israel that whosoever slays a soul – unless it be for another soul or working corruption upon the earth – it is as though he slew mankind altogether, and whoever saves the life of one, it is as though he saved the life of mankind altogether.'*

The reference is to the story of Cain and Abel. Killing another human being is contrary to God's law. The Qur'an makes an exception for those who have been responsible for killing, or for people who *'work corruption upon the earth'*. Such people can rightly be killed.

As we saw in studying the Qur'an's teaching on the use of violence to defend and propagate Islam, those who *'work corruption upon the earth'* came to extend to all who refuse to submit to God's revelation through Muhammad, and refuse to accept Muhammad as God's Messenger. The following verses describe how disbelievers should be treated.

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

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

Sûrah 5:46 *'We sent Jesus son of Mary, confirming the Torah that had come before him, and We gave him the Gospel, wherein is a guidance and a light, confirming the Torah that had come before him, as a guidance and an exhortation to the reverent'*.

Muhammad only ever speaks of the Gospels (never of the writings of Paul and the other writings of the Christian Scriptures). It is also unclear which Gospels he was familiar with (see page 11).

Sûrah 5:51, 54, 55 *'O you who believe! Take not the Jews and Christians as protectors (awliya'). They are the protectors of one another. And whosoever takes them as protectors, surely he is of them ... God will bring a people whom He loves and who love Him, humble towards the believers ... Your protector is only God and his Messenger, and those who believe, who perform the prayer and give alms while bowing down.'*

We examined this statement, and others like it, on page 24. It has been used by some Muslim groups to demand the religious right not to support or obey a non-Muslim government.

Sûrah 5:66 reads: *'Had they [Jews and Christians] observed the Torah and the Gospel and that which was sent down to them by their Lord, they would surely have received nourishment from above and from beneath their feet. There is a moderate community among them, but as for many of them, evil is what they do!'*

Muslims would surely not exclude themselves from a similar judgment. It does bring home the point that if we Christians, then and now, all lived faithfully as disciples of Jesus, how different the world would be!

Sûrah 5:82 *'Thou wilt surely find the most hostile of men toward those who believe to be the Jews and those who ascribe partners unto God. And you will find the nearest in affection toward those who believe to be those who say, "We are Christians". That is because among them are priests and monks, and because they are not arrogant.'*

The Qur'an is not consistent in its judgment of Christians (see 2:62; 3:199; 5:66; 5:82; 9:30-31; 29:46).

The Study Quran states: 'According to most commentators, the occasion for the revelation of these verses was the later visit of a delegation by the Negus [the Christian king of Ethiopia] to the prophet in Madina' (page 319 column 2).

Sûrah 5:110 *'God will say, "O Jesus son of Mary! Remember My Blessing upon thee, and upon thy mother, when I strengthened thee with the Holy Spirit, that thou mightest speak to people in the cradle and in maturity; and when I taught thee the Book, Wisdom, the Torah, and the Gospel; and how thou wouldst create out of clay the shape of a bird, by My Leave, and thou wouldst breathe into it, and it would become a bird, by My Leave; and thou wouldst heal the blind and the leper, by My Leave; and thou wouldst bring forth the dead, by My Leave; and how I restrained the Children of Israel from thee, when thou didst bring them clear proofs, and those who disbelieved among them said: "This is nought but manifest sorcery.'*

The story of the clay bird is legendary material, which Muhammad must have picked up from Gnostic sources. This is the only sûrah where Muhammad shows some knowledge of scenes from Jesus' public ministry.

Sûrah 5: 112-115 refers to another scene in Jesus' public ministry: the multiplication of the loaves.

Sûrah 5:116 *'O Jesus, son of Mary! Did you say unto mankind: "Take me and my mother as gods apart from God?"*

We reflected on the Qur'an's mistaken view of the Christian teaching on the Trinity on pages 20ff.

Sûrah 6 (from Mecca).

Much of this section focuses on the Oneness of God and on what will happen to those who believe and to those who do not. It makes the claim that pagan Arabs, as well as Jewish and Christian Arabs, will find forgiveness from the Merciful God if they submit to God as revealed in the Qur'an. People who persist in rejecting God and God's revelation will suffer the consequences.

Sûrah 6:39 *'Whomsoever God will, He leads astray, and whomsoever He will, He places him upon a straight path.'*

The Qur'an assumes that whatever happens is ultimately the work of God. Thanks to Jesus Christians have learned that God loves all that God has made. God does not control creation, but respects the freedom given to the universe, and especially to us human beings. It is not God who *leads astray*. It is our own sinful refusal to welcome God's love. See our earlier reflections (page 14).

Sûrah 6:100-101 *'They make the jinn [spirits of an order lower than angels] partners unto God, though He created them, and falsely attribute sons and daughters to Him, without any knowledge. Glory be to Him! Exalted is He above that which they ascribe! The unique Originator of the heavens and the earth! How should He have a child when he has no consort' (verses 100-101).*

The Qur'an is speaking primarily of the pagan polytheists, though Muhammad thought (wrongly) that Christians taught that God had a mother (Mary) and a child (Jesus). See the reflections on Christian monotheism on pages 15ff.

Sûrah 6:101-102 *'He created all things, and He is Knower of all things? That is God, your Lord, there is no God but He, Creator of all things. So worship Him. And He is Guardian over all things'* (verses 101-102).

We Christians share this belief with our Muslim brothers and sisters.

Sûrah 6:115 *'The Word of thy Lord is fulfilled in truth and justice.'*

Sûrah 7 (from Mecca).

This section is largely an appeal to the pagans, especially it seems Muhammad's own tribe, the Quraysh of Mecca. Muhammad reminds them of ancient Arab messengers from God and their refusal to heed God's word.

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

Sûrah 7:42-43 *'As for those who believe and perform righteous deeds – We task no one beyond their capacity – it is they who are the inhabitants of the Garden; they shall abide therein. And We will remove whatever rancour lies within their breasts. Rivers shall run below them. And they will say, "Praise be to God, Who guided us into this. We would not have been rightly guided, had not God guided us. The messengers of our Lord certainly brought the truth.'*

This is one among many texts where the Qur'an holds out to believers the promise of Paradise: perfect human bliss willed by God; not communion with God as Christians believe.

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

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

Sûrah 8 (from Medina). excerpts

This section deals, for the most part, with a revelation concerning the spoils of war, resulting from the victory of the Muslims at Badr against the army of the Quraysh from Mecca.

Commentators disagree as to who is being addressed in the following verse. If it is addressed to the Quraysh, the first sentence is ironical. They sought victory and it has come, but not to them. God has given victory to the *'believers'*, the Muslims.

Sûrah 8:19 *'If you seek victory, then victory has come to you. If you desist it would be better for you. If you return We shall return, and your company will not avail you aught, even if they be many. Know that God is with the believers.'*

Muhammad and his followers were doing what was customary among the Arabian tribes. They were attacking other tribes for booty and power. In this instance they were fighting for their life against the Quraysh of Mecca, Muhammad's own tribe. The fact that they were victorious was for them a sign that God was with them.

On pages 30-34 we examined the Qur'an's teaching about divine authorisation for the use of force to defend Islam and to propagate it. It is a key theme in this sûrah.

'I shall cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieve. So strike above the neck, and strike their every fingertip' (verse 12).

'Fight them until there is no strife, and religion is wholly for God' (verse 39).

'Know that whatsoever you take as spoils, a fifth is for God and the Messenger, and for kinsfolk, orphans, the indigent, and the traveller' (verse 41).

'O you who believe! When you meet a company in battle, be firm and remember God much, that haply you may prosper' (verse 45).

'Prepare for them what you can of strength [of arms] and horses tethered [for battle]. Frightening thereby the enemy of God and your enemy, and others besides them whom you know not. God knows them. Whatsoever you spend in the way of God will be paid unto you in full. And you shall not be wronged' (verse 60).

'O prophet! Rouse the believers to fight' (verse 65).

'It is not for a prophet to take captives until he overwhelms his enemy in the land' (verse 67)

Put bluntly, prisoners are to be killed. There is nothing parallel in the Christian Scriptures. Christianity is a movement of people who are inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus. It is not a political movement.

In 380AD Emperor Theodosius I made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. After that it was possible for a state made up of Christians to wage war, as Jews had done, and as Muslims were to do. When so-called Christian states did this, they were acting as states, not as Christians. It was Jesus' teaching that we should love our enemies because God loves them.

In the early centuries when Christianity suffered persecution, it grew, not by the power of the sword, but through the attraction of love and the meaning it offered people.

Sûrah 9 (from Medina).

Much of the section is addressed to those who failed to join Muhammad in his campaigns.

Sûrah 9:5 *'When the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wheresoever you find them, capture them, besiege them, and lie in wait for them in every place of ambush. But if they repent and perform the prayer and give the alms, then let them go their way. Truly, God is Forgiving, Merciful.'*

Sûrah 9:29 *'Fight those who believe not in God and in the Last Day, and who do not forgive what God and his Messenger have forbidden, and who follow not the Religion of Truth among those who were given the Book till they pay the Jizyah with a willing hand, being humbled.'*

See the reflections on pages 30ff on the use of force to propagate Islam.

Sûrah 9:30-31 *'The Jews say that Ezra is the son of God; and the Christians say that the Messiah is the son of God. Those are words from their mouths. They resemble those who disbelieved before. God curse them! How they are perverted! They have taken their rabbis and monks as lords apart from God, as well as the Messiah, son of Mary, though they were commanded to worship one God. There is no God but He! Glory be to Him above the partners they ascribe.'*

We do not know what Muhammad might have heard Jews saying, but, as far as the Jewish Scriptures are concerned, the Qur'an is wrong about Ezra. The Jewish Scriptures see him as God's faithful priest, not as the son of God. It also misunderstands the Christian teaching about Jesus. See our treatment of this on pages 20ff. Christians do not believe that Jesus is a second God.

It is one thing to listen to these words coming from Muhammad. It is another to be asked to accept them as coming from God and expressing God's judgment of Jews and Christians!

To fulfil the mission given him by God, Muhammad relied on God's authorisation to spread belief by force of arms: *'to prevail over all religion'* (verse 33).

Sûrah 9:63 *'Do they not know that whosoever opposes God and His Messenger, surely for him will be the Fire of Hell, to abide therein?'*

On pages 28-30 we compared the Muslim and the Christian teaching on hell.

Sûrah 9:71 *'The believing men and believing women are friends of one another.'*

One of the reasons for Muhammad's success in achieving power was to replace the relationships that bound people to their family and tribe with the bond of being Muslim.

For Christians, too, there is a strong bond among those who share faith in Jesus and in God as revealed by him.

Luke quotes a saying of Jesus that sounds shocking, if we fail to understand the Aramaic idiom he is using: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and

children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14:26). When 'hate' and 'love' are contrasted in Aramaic they do not refer to feelings of antipathy or attraction. They speak of choice, of preference.

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

Sûrah 9:73 'O Prophet! Strive against the disbelievers and the hypocrites and be harsh with them. Their refuge is Hell. What an evil journey's end!'

See the reflections on pages 29-30 comparing the teaching of the New Testament and the Qur'an on hell.

Sûrah 9:80 'If thou seekest forgiveness for them seventy times, God will not forgive them. That is because they disbelieve in God and His Messenger, and God guides not iniquitous people.'

Jesus had a very different image of God! To be forgiven we must open our hearts to welcome God's offer of grace, but from God's side, God is love and is always ready to forgive. There are no limits to God's offer of forgiveness and guidance. God continues to love and guide '*iniquitous people*.'

Jesus tells a story about a rich man who showed no care for a poor man lying at his gate (Luke 16:19-31). Both die. The poor man is in heaven. The rich man is in hell. It is too late for forgiveness, not because God has stopped loving, but because love does not force itself upon anyone, and the rich man has locked himself into a place where God's love cannot reach. It matters how we behave and it matters eternally. We are foolish to put off repentance.

Sûrah 9:84 'Never pray over one of them (disbelievers) who dies, nor stand by his grave..'

We are a long way from Jesus' command that we love our enemies (Matthew 5:44).

Sûrah 9:129 'God suffices me. There is no God but He. In Him do I trust.'

Christians would joyfully share this beautiful prayer of trust with our Muslim brothers and sisters. The expression '*In God let the believers trust*' is found throughout the Qur'an (see Sûrahs 3:122, 160; 5:11; 9:51; 12:67; 14:11-12; 39:38; 58:10; 64:13).

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

Sûrah 10 (from Mecca).

Sûrah 10:15 *'When Our signs are recited unto them as clear proofs, those who anticipate not the meeting with Us say "Bring a Qur'an other than this, or alter it." Say, "It is not for me to alter it of my own accord. I follow only that which is revealed to me.'*

On page 24 we saw how the Qur'an explains the contradictory statements found in it. Put simply: God can do anything God chooses to do. God is not bound by human reason and logic. God is free to abrogate a revelation and replace it with another. God is free to do this, but, as this sûrah states, Muhammad is not. He can say only what has been revealed to him.

Sûrah 10:80-91 speaks of Moses, Aaron and the Pharaoh of Egypt.

It draws on the Jewish Scriptures for examples of God warning people to follow God's way. When we neglect to do so, there is punishment. Sometimes, as, for example, with Jonah (see verse 99), people heed the warning to repent, and are forgiven.

The Qur'an challenges the Jews to heed the warning God is giving them through Muhammad. If they listen and repent, God *'the Forgiving, the Merciful'* (verse 108) will bless them.

Sûrah 11 (from Mecca).

Sûrah 11:2 *'Worship none but God. Truly I am a warner for Him, and a bearer of glad tidings.'*

We reflected on Muhammad as a warner and bearer of glad tidings when we looked at the Qur'an's teaching on hell (see page 29).

After speaking of reward and punishment, this section focuses on the story of Noah (verses 25-48), which tells of God's punishment and God's favour. It reminds the people that those who did not listen to the warning given by Noah were destroyed. It will be the same for those who reject the warning God is giving through Muhammad.

We hear too of three Arabian prophets who, like Noah, were saved by God from the catastrophe that fell on the people: Hûd (verses 50-60); Sâlih (verses 61-68); and Shu'ayb (verses 84-88; identified by some with Jethro, Moses' father-in-law).

It speaks, too, of the story of Abraham and Lot (verses 70-83), and Isaac and Jacob (verse 71).

Sûrah 11:75 *'Truly Abraham was clement, tender-hearted, penitent.'*

Muhammad saw himself as being called by God to draw Jews, Christians and the polytheistic tribes to follow faithfully the religion of Abraham.

Jesus challenged his contemporaries: 'If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did' (John 8:39).

Paul speaks of 'those who share the faith of Abraham who is the father of all of us' (Romans 4:16).

Sûrah 12 (from Mecca).

This surah is a re-telling of the story of Joseph (see Genesis 37-50).

Sûrah 13 (from Mecca).

This section focuses on God as Creator, on God's revelation through Muhammad and on God's reward for the good and punishment of the evil.

Sûrah 13:30 *'Thus have We sent thee unto a community, before whom other communities have passed away; that thou mayest recite to them what We have revealed to thee; yet they disbelieve in the Compassionate. Say, He is my Lord; there is no god but He. In Him do I trust and to Him I turn.'*

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

That God is compassionate is at the heart of Jesus' revelation (see the commentary on Sûrah 1, page 34). On trust see the reflection on Sûrah 9:129 (page 51).

Sûrah 14 (from Mecca).

This section speaks of God's choice of Moses and Abraham and the importance of heeding what God revealed through them.

Sûrah 14:1 *'This is a Book that we have sent down unto thee, that thou mightest bring forth mankind out of darkness into light, by the leave of their Lord, to the path of the Mighty, the Praised.'*

We find this theme of darkness and light repeated often in the Christian Gospels. Jesus said to a leading Jew:

"This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God"(John 3:19-21).

Sûrah 14:49-52 *'On that Day thou wilt see the guilty bound together in fetters, their garments made of pitch, and the Fire covering their faces, that God may recompense every soul for that which it has earned; surely God is swift in reckoning. This is a proclamation unto mankind that they may be warned thereby, and that they may know that He is the One God, and that the possessors of intellect might be reminded.'*

On pages 30f we compared the Muslim and the Christian view on Hell. Jesus showed us that God is love, and nothing we can do will change that. Love cannot force itself upon another. We are free to accept or reject God's love and our acceptance or rejection has consequences. These are not a reward or a punishment from a judge. It is we who choose heaven

(communion with God) by welcoming God's love, or hell (separation from God) by obstinate, persistent, refusal of love.

Sûrah 15 (from Mecca).

This section includes the story of the creation of man from clay and God's Spirit (verses 26-29).

The refusal of the idolaters of Mecca to acknowledge Muhammad as God's prophet is compared to the refusal of a leading angel to prostrate himself before man (verse 31). This angel (Iblis, Satan, the Devil) was cast out of paradise and tempts people to evil (verses 34-50).

Also in the sûrah is the story of the heavenly guests who told Abraham he would have a son, and of Lot's escape from the destruction of Sodom (verses 51-74). The surah presents this as a sign of how God treats unbelievers: those who do not accept the Qur'an as God's revelation or Muhammad as God's Messenger (verses 77-84).

Sûrah 16 (from Mecca).

This is a treatise on Providence.

Sûrah 16:18 *'Were you to count the blessings of God you could not number them.'*

Paul writes: 'God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work' (2 Corinthians 9:8).

Sûrah 16:93 *'Had God willed, He would have made you one community. But He leads astray whomever He will and guides whomever He will.'*

We Christians do not put limits on God's power, but, thanks to the revelation given us by Jesus, we see God as 'Love'. This means that true power is the power of love. It is God's Love that knows no limit.

God has given us freedom and does not control our use of freedom. If we choose a destructive path, it is not God who leads us astray.

Sûrah 16:101-102 *'When we replace one sign with another – and God knows best that which He sends down – they say, "you are only a fabricator." Nay but most of them do not know. Say, "the Holy Spirit has brought it down from thy Lord in, to make firm those who believe, and as guidance and glad tidings for those who submit.'*

This is yet another attempt to deal with the contradictions that occur in the Qur'an. See our reflections on page 24. See also Sûrah 10:15 (page 52). It acknowledges that God is free to 'replace one sign with another' and asserts that God is testing us to 'submit' to His revelation even when we cannot resolve the contradiction.

Sûrah 17 (from Mecca).

Sûrah 17:1 *'Glory be to Him Who carried his servant by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque, whose precincts we have blessed that we might show him some of our signs. Truly He is the Hearer, the Seer.'*

Muhammad is recording a dream he had of being taken into heaven. 'Farthest' translates '*al aqsa*', the name given to a small mosque built in the 7th century, after the death of Muhammad at the extremity of the Temple Mount on the site of a Christian church. A tradition grew up that Muhammad visited Jerusalem riding a winged horse through the sky. This is the foundation of the claim by Muslims that Jerusalem should be a Muslim capital.

Sûrah 17:25 *'If you are righteous, then truly He is Forgiving toward the penitent.'*

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

Paul picked up Jesus' teaching about God's forgiveness when he pleaded with the Christian community in Corinth to forgive a member who had behaved badly. He wanted God's gracious forgiveness to flow through them: 'You should forgive and console him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him' (2 Corinthians 2:7-8).

Christians do not limit God's forgiveness to '*the righteous*'. This is central to Paul's experience. As he wrote to the Christian community in Rome: 'God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8).

Sûrah 17:26 *'Give to the kinsman his right, and to the indigent, and the traveller, but do not squander wastefully.'*

James is faithful to his Jewish heritage and to Jesus when he includes in his definition of religion 'to care for orphans and widows in their distress' (James 1:27).

He insists on action, not words: 'If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says: "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat your fill," without supplying their bodily needs, what is the good of that?' (James 2:15-16).

He categorises neglecting the poor and 'spending what you get on your pleasures' as equivalent to adultery, for it is to break our part in our covenant with God (see James 4:3-4).

'The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, wages that you have kept back by fraud, cry out to God' (James 5:4).

In his teaching on giving what we have to those in need, Jesus calls us to what this sūrah may consider under '*squander wastefully*'.

'If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous' (Matthew 5:40-45).

Jesus' image of God differs from that revealed in Sūrah 17:26. For Jesus God's love is unconditional and extravagant. He calls his followers to emulate that love.

Sūrah 17:31 *'Slay not your children for fear of poverty. We shall provide for them and for you. Surely their slaying is great sin.'*

This statement gives us an insight into the tribal customs of the time.

Sūrah 17:32 *'Do not come near adultery; truly it is indecency and an evil way.'*

Jesus speaks against adultery. He goes further, challenging us to be pure in heart: 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart' (Matthew 5:27-28).

Sūrah 17:35 *'Give full measure when you measure, and weigh with a right balance.'*

Similar injunctions recur throughout the Qur'an.

In the Christian Scriptures, the principle underlying this exhortation is expressed by James, who is critical of injustice perpetrated by the rich:

'Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter' (James 5:3-5).

Sūrah 17:78 *'Perform the prayer at the declining of the sun until the darkening of the night. And the recitation at dawn – truly the recitation at dawn is ever witnessed.'*

It seems to me that one of the strengths of Islam is its simplicity and its communal nature. There are certain things the Muslim community is not to do, and there are certain things to do, notably, as in this text, to pray at certain times. Ritual prayer (Salât) is one of the five pillars of Islam (see page 14).

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

Sûrah 17:81 *'Truth has come and falsehood has vanished. Truly falsehood is ever vanishing.'*

Tradition has it that Muhammad recited these words when he witnessed the destruction of the idols around the Ka'bah after the conquest of Mecca in 630AD.

Christians see Jesus as God's focal Word, revealing who God really is. Throughout John's Gospel it is this revelation that is meant by the word 'truth'. 'Grace and truth came through Jesus the Messiah' (John 1:17). 'You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free' (John 8:32). Jesus is 'the Way, and the Truth, and the Life' (John 14:6). Jesus reveals God as Love (the Truth). He leads us to God (the Way), so that we can share his love-communion with God (the Life).

Sûrah 17:82 *'We sent down of the Qur'an that which is a cure and a mercy for the believers.'*

Sûrah 17:86 *'If We willed, We could take away that which We revealed unto thee.'*

This is yet another statement of God's freedom to reveal what God wants. God is not bound by what we might see as reasonable and logical. We studied this text and others like it on page 24.

Sûrah 18 (from Mecca).

Sûrah 18:28 *'Make thy soul patient with those who call upon their Lord morning and evening, desiring His Face. Turn not thine eyes away from them, desiring the adornment of the life of this world, nor obeying one whose heart We have made heedless of the remembrance of Us and who follow his caprice and whose affair exceeds the bounds.'*

Sûrah 18:47 *'Wealth and children are an ornament of the life of this world, but that which endures – righteous deeds – are better in reward with the Lord, and better hope.'*

As we saw when reflecting on Sûrah 9:71 (page 48), for Jesus, too, there are values that transcend family. In regard to '*righteous deeds*', Matthew quotes Jesus as saying: 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled' (Matthew 5:6).

Sûrah 18:106 *'That is their recompense – Hell, for having disbelieved, and for mocking My signs and My messengers.'*

In sûrah after sûrah the Qur'an declares that God has chosen Muhammad to warn of the punishment of Hell for those who do not accept God's revelations through him. On hell in the Qur'an see page 33.

Sûrah 19 (from Mecca).

This Sûrah has nearly one third of all instances of calling God Ar-Rahmân (The Compassionate). It is also the only sûrah named after a woman, 'Mary' the mother of Jesus. Mary is the only woman in the Qur'an called by her name.

Sûrah 19 speaks first of Zechariah and the miraculous birth of his son, John (verses 2-15). It goes on to speak of the virginal conception of Jesus by his mother, Mary (Miryam, verses 16-34). In verse 28 Mary is called 'sister of Aaron.'

Sûrah 19:35 *'It is not for God to take a child.'*

As we saw on page 21, Muhammad misunderstood the Christian belief that Jesus is the 'Son of God'.

The section goes on to describe how Abraham was banished by his father for failing to continue to worship the gods of his tradition by insisting on the truth that there is only one God (verses 41-48). It then speaks of Isaac, Jacob, Moses and Aaron (verses 49-53); and then of Ishmael (verses 54-55); then Idris (identified with Noah; verse 56). The rest of the section is a condemnation of unbelievers.

Sûrah 19:96 *'Surely those who believe and perform righteous deeds, for them shall the Compassionate ordain love.'*

Sûrah 20 (from Mecca).

This sûrah tells the story of Moses at the burning bush, and his confrontation with the Pharaoh of Egypt, the escape of the Israelites, Moses' encounter with God on the mountain and the people's infidelity in worshipping the golden calf. This infidelity goes back to the infidelity of Adam in the Garden. The Qur'an claims that God is now revealing everything to Muhammad for the salvation of the human race.

Sûrah 20:5 *'The Compassionate mounted the Throne.'*

Sûrah 21 (from Mecca).

There were Jewish and Christian tribes in Arabia during Muhammad's life. He, however, was born into a pagan tribe, the Quraysh, who were polytheists. Muhammad's key mystical experience was his seeing that there is only one God. It is this conviction that is expressed in every section of the Qur'an, including Sûrah 21. In verse 108 Muhammad is instructed: *'Say, "It is only revealed unto me that your God is one God. So will you be submitters?"*

Sûrah 21:91 *'As for she who preserved her chastity, we breathed into her Our Spirit, and made her and her son a sign for the worlds.'*

See the commentary on Sûrah 3:45 (page 39) for Luke's account of God's breathing the Spirit into Mary.

Sûrah 21:92-93 *'Truly this community of yours is one community, and I am your Lord. So worship Me! But they have fragmented their affair among themselves. Each is returning unto Us.'*

Muhammad witnessed the fragmentation of the Jewish and Christian communities that were divided into sects and denominations. The Qur'an rejoices that there were Jews and

Christians who were joining the *'one community'* of Islam. Tragically, Islam also suffers from divisions.

Jesus prayed: 'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me' (John 17:20-21).

Sûrah 22 (part from Mecca and part from Medina).

Sûrah 22:17 *'As for those who believe, and those who are Jews, the Sabeans, the Christians, the Magians, and the idolaters, indeed God will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection. Truly God is witness over all things.'*

As regularly in the Qur'an, Christians are included among those who do not believe.

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

We looked at the Muslim and Christian views of hell on pages 28-30.

Sûrah 22:27 *'Proclaim the Hajj among mankind. They shall come to thee on foot and on all manners of lean beast, coming from all deep and distant mountain highways.'*

As noted on page 14, the pilgrimage to Mecca (the Hajj) is one of the five pillars of Islam

Sûrah 22:78 *'Strive [jahada] for God as He should be striven for. He has chosen [for] you – and has placed no hardship for you in the religion – the creed of your father, Abraham He named you muslims aforetime, and herein, that the Messenger may be a witness for you, and that you may be witnesses for mankind. So perform the prayer and give the alms, and hold fast to God. He is your Master, and how excellent a Master, and how excellent a Helper.'*

On pages 27ff we looked at the use of the word 'jihad' (striving) in the Qur'an. It speaks of the commitment needed to live the way revealed by God. Unfortunately living the way of God includes the use of violence to defend and propagate Islam.

Here Muhammad is speaking of submission to God's will, striving to do what God commands and striving against what God has forbidden.

For Muhammad, Abraham was the first Muslim, the first to submit to the will of the One God. All who share Abraham's faith are true Muslims. Muhammad sees this especially in Moses and Jesus and those who follow them faithfully. Muhammad sees himself, not as revealing a new religion, but as calling everyone to be faithful followers of Abraham (see the commentary on Sûrah 11:75, page 52).

Sûrah 23 (from Mecca).

This section gives a primitive account of how human beings are made (verses 12-14). It tells the story of how Noah's revelation was rejected because he was only a mortal, and how

Noah was saved and his opponents killed (verses 23-30). This set the pattern for future generations. For Muhammad, Noah's being saved and the disbelievers being killed is an example of what was happening to him and to those who opposed him.

Sûrah 23:52-53 'Truly this community of yours is one community, and I am your Lord, so reverence Me. But they made their affair to be founded on different scriptures, each party exulting in what it had.'

The section goes on to speak of Moses and 'the son of Mary' (verse 50). It is full of advice as to what those who believe in God and God's revelation through Muhammad are to say when questioned.

Sûrah 24 (from Medina).

Most of this section consists in regulations for the purifying of home life. Muhammad is concerned to regulate every aspect of the lives of those who believe in God and who submit to the revelations given through him. He is concerned to legislate against false accusations in matters of chastity. In general the Qur'an upholds traditional Arabic practices, while legislating against blatant injustices.

Sûrah 24:2 and 4 'As for the adulterer and the adulteress, flog them each one hundred lashes ... Those who accuse chaste women, but do not then bring four witnesses, flog them eighty lashes, and never afterward accept any testimony from them.'

Such regulations are at home in seventh century tribal Arabia. The Qur'an is insisting on faithfulness and truthful witness.

Jesus' attitude and teaching regarding human misbehaviour comes from his intimate knowledge of God. It is not for us to condemn people in their sin. Rather, we are to offer them the love that can rescue them from it. We find the following account in the Gospel of John, chapter 8:2-12.

'Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him.

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again".'

Sûrah 24:31 *'Tell the believing women to lower their eyes and to guard their private parts, and to not display their adornment except that which is visible thereof, and let them draw their kerchiefs over their breasts, and not display their adornment except to their husbands. [The text goes on to list the males who are part of her family or the family of her husband]. Nor let them stamp their feet [dance] in such a way that the adornment they conceal becomes known.'* (see also 33:59 - *'Tell them to draw their cloaks over themselves.'*)

Today: Burqa (complete cover); Niqab (face cover); Hijab (head scarf).

Sûrah 24:35 *'Light upon light. God guides into His light whomsoever He wills.'*

Sûrah 24:60 *'As for elderly women who no longer anticipate marriage there is no blame upon them to doff their garments [the thiyab] without displaying any ornament. And it is better for them to be modest, and God is Hearing, Knowing.'*

These verses are rather vague and have been used over the centuries to support various dress customs in cultures in which women are considered as male possessions. They should be read in the light of seventh century Arab dress customs.

The call to modesty is surely admirable so long as the way a woman is expected to dress is not imposed by men, and in God's name.

Sûrah 25 (from Mecca).

This section lists the objections from his tribe, the Quraysh, against Muhammad's claim to be a Messenger to them from God. It speaks, too, of the punishment of the Flood at the time of Noah (verse 37), and of the destruction of the towns of the Dead Sea at the time of Lot (verse 40). Caravans from Mecca to Syria passed by the Dead Sea. It was there for all to see.

This sûrah acts as a warning to those who refuse to heed the revelations made through Muhammad. They must listen to God, the Creator of the universe.

Sûrah 25:56 *'We sent thee not save as a bearer of good news and as a warner.'*

The Qur'an regularly describes Muhammad's mission in these words (see page 29).

Sûrah 25:57-58 *'Say "I ask not of you any reward for it, save that whosoever decides may take a way unto his Lord. And trust in the Living One Who dies not, and hymn His praise. And God suffices as One aware of the sins of His servants.'*

Muhammad is being encouraged not to seek any reward for what he is doing, except the reward of seeing people become faithful Muslims. He is to place his trust in God, and not be discouraged by his sins. God has chosen him. That is enough.

I am reminded of Paul's words: 'I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him ... I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming

like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead' (Philippians 3:8-11).

Sûrah 26 (from Mecca).

This section tells the story of Moses and Pharaoh (verses 10-68). It goes on to tell the story of Abraham (verses 69-104) and then Noah and the destruction of those who refused to believe (verse 106ff).

The Arabian tribe of 'Ad rejected the prophesy of Hûd (verses 123-140). The Arabian tribe of Thamûd rejected the prophecy of Sâlih (verses 141-175). The people of Midian rejected the prophecy of Shu'eyb (verses 176-89).

The sûrah goes on to speak of God's 'revelation' through Muhammad (verses 190-227).

Sûrah 27 (from Mecca).

Among other things this section tells the story of Moses and the burning bush, and his miraculous staff (verses 7-14), and the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (verses 22-44). It also tells the story of the destruction of the cities of the Dead Sea (verses 45-58).

Sûrah 27:62 *'He answers the one in distress when he calls upon Him and removes the evil ... Is there a god alongside God?'*

I am reminded of Jesus' prayer: 'Do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one' (Matthew 6:13).

Reflecting especially on Jesus' agony in Gethsemane and his cry from the cross, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes: 'In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him out of death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission' (Hebrews 5:7).

Sûrah 27:79-81 *'Trust in God; truly thou standest upon the manifest truth. Surely thou dost not make the dead hear, nor dost thou make the deaf hear the call when they turn their backs; Nor canst thou guide the blind away from their error. Thou canst only make hear those who believe in Our signs and are submitters.'*

Muhammad's responsibility is to convey God's words. He is not responsible for others choosing to heed or not heed his words.

Sûrah 28 (from Mecca).

This section tells the story of Moses (verses 3-44), and of the earth swallowing up Korah (lines 76-81; see Numbers 16).

Sûrah 28:56 *'Surely thou dost not guide whomsoever thou lovest, but God guides whomsoever He will.'*

Muslims believe that the guidance found in the Qur'an does not have its origin in Muhammad, but in God. Muhammad is God's Messenger.

Jesus, too, sees God, his Father, as the source of guidance: 'I speak as the Father instructed me ... I declare what I have seen in my Father's presence' (John 8:28, 38).

As noted on page 13, for us Christians it is Jesus' person that reveals God. The words of the sacred texts point to him and so to the God he reveals.

Sûrah 28:59 *'The Lord never destroys towns until he sends a messenger to their mother city to recite unto them Our signs. And We never destroy towns, save when their people are wrongdoers.'*

This underlines the justice and mercy of God. However, the image of a God who destroys cities is a dangerous one (drawn from the Jewish Scriptures), for it can justify our destruction of cities in God's name when we judge that the cause is right, when the people are *'wrongdoers.'*

Jesus' image of God as Love, and his refusal to identify our enemies as God's enemies, is very different from the image of God found here.

Sûrah 29 (possibly from Mecca).

Noah and Lot are presented as those chosen by God. Their enemies were destroyed.

Sûrah 29:46 *'Dispute not with the people of the Book, save in the most virtuous manner, unless it be with those of them who have done wrong. And say, "We believe in that which was sent down unto us and was sent down unto you; our God and your God are One, and unto Him are we submitters".'*

It is not surprising to find such a positive view of Christians in Muhammad's Meccan period, when he was trying to win Christians over to join the Muslim community. The Qur'an respects the revelation given to Moses and to Jesus, for it is the One God who has revealed God's Self to them and to Muhammad. It has problems with Jews and Christians because it sees them as not living in ways that are faithful to revelation. If they did, they would accept the revelation sent down to Muhammad, and see it as completing earlier revelations (see also Sûrah 2:136, page 38).

Sûrah 30 (from Mecca).

Verses 2-4 offers a good example of the ambiguity in the text because it lacks vowels. The Arabic can mean 'The Byzantines have 'defeated or, as the Study Quran translates, *'The Byzantines have been defeated'*. Muhammad looks forward to the universal kingdom of those (the Muslims) who believe the revelations coming through him. God will continue to destroy kingdoms that are not obedient to God's will.

Sûrah 30:30-32 *'Set thy face to religion as a hanif (a submitter), in the primordial nature from God upon which He originated mankind – there is no altering the creation of God; that is the upright religion, but most of mankind know not – turning unto Him. And reverence Him*

and perform the prayer, and be nopt among the idolaters, among those who have divided their religion and become factions, each party rejoicing in that which it has.'

Sûrah 30:38 *'Give to the kinsman his right, and to the indigent and the traveller. That is better for those who desire the Face of God. It is they who will prosper.'*

The Qur'an consistently calls for care for the needy and the stranger. Christians share this value (see page 34).

Sûrah 30:43 *'Set thy face to the upright religion, before there comes a day from God that none can repel. That day they will be spread asunder [some to Heaven and some to Hell].'*

A constant theme in the Qur'an is that nothing can thwart God's will. Christians include in our reflections the truth that God has willed that we be free and God respects this freedom unconditionally. This means that we cannot conclude from the fact that something happens that it is God's will. When we sin we act against God's will, and God respects our decision. It matters what decisions we make and we will be judged accordingly. God is constantly gracing us and inspiring us to what is good, but God does not micro-manage creation. God loves, God does not control, the world.

Sûrah 31 (from Mecca).

This section speaks of an Arab wise man, Luqmân, and his advice to his son (verses 12ff).

Sûrah 31:18-19 *'Turn not your cheek at men in scorn, nor walk exultantly upon the earth. Surely God does not love any vainglorious boaster. Be moderate in thy pace and lower thy voice. Truly, the vilest of voices is those of asses.'*

Sound practical advice similar to the kind of 'wisdom' one finds in the Hebrew Wisdom Literature.

In the New Testament James writes: 'You boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil' (James 4:16).

Sûrah 31:22-23 *'Whosoever submits his face to God and is virtuous has indeed grasped the most unfailing handhold, and unto God is the end of all affairs. And whosoever does not believe, let not his disbelief grieve thee. Unto Us is their return; then We shall inform them of that which they did. Truly God knows what lies within breasts.'*

In reference to God's judgment the Book of the Apocalypse uses the image of books: the 'book' in which all our deeds are recorded (In other words, God knows us thoroughly). And the 'book of life', in which all are named who have responded to the grace offered them by the Risen Christ, even if they did not know that they were responding to him: 'I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books' (Revelation 20:12).

Judgment should be left to God. As Jesus said: 'Judge not so that you will not be judged' (Matthew 7:1).

Sûrah 32 (from Mecca).

Sûrah 32:4, 7-9 *'God it is Who created the heavens and the earth, and that which is between them in six days ... He made beautiful all that He created, and began the creation of man from clay; then He made his seed from a draught of base fluid. Then He fashioned him and breathed into him His Spirit.'*

The Qur'an is drawing on the story of creation in the Book of Genesis.

Sûrah 32:23 *'Indeed We gave Moses the Book; so be not in doubt regarding the meeting with Him; and We made him a guide for the Children of Israel.'*

On page 8ff we noted how the Qur'an draws on the Hebrew Scriptures.

Sûrah 33 (from Medina).

Sûrah 33:25 *'God turned back those who disbelieved in their rage; they attained no good. God sufficed the believers in battle, and God is Strong, Mighty.'*

The background to this section is the failed attempt by a coalition to destroy the Muslims at the Battle of the Trench in 627AD. The coalition included Bani Nadîr, a Jewish tribe that Muhammad had expelled from Medina, Muhammad's own tribe, the Quraysh of Mecca, the desert tribe of Ghatafân, and the Banû Qurayzah, a Jewish tribe of Medina. The attempt failed in spite of the fact that Muhammad had, allegedly, about three thousand troops and faced the enemy who had an army of about ten thousand, as well as six hundred horses and many camels. After a month the siege of Medina was lifted. The Battle of the Trench was the last attempt by the Quraysh of Mecca to defeat Muhammad.

This sûrah speaks of Muhammad's wives who are to *'obey God and His Messenger'* (verses 30-34). It speaks of Muhammad's marriage to his cousin Zeynah. Muhammad had arranged for Zeynah to marry Zeyd his adopted son. When the marriage ended in divorce, he took her as his wife (verse 37).

As noted earlier (page 7), when he was twenty-five Muhammad married Khadija, who was fifteen years his senior. He was fifty when she died. After her death he took many wives. He could marry as many women as he desired.

Sûrah 33:40 *'Muhammad is not the father of any man among you; rather he is the Messenger of God and the seal of the prophets'. And God is Knower of all things.'*

Muhammad had two sons. Both died in childhood.

Sûrah 33:50 permits Muhammad to have many wives. We examined it when reflecting on relations of men and women in the Qur'an (see page 26).

Sûrah 33:59 *'O Prophet! Tell your wives and daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks over themselves'* (see also 24:31).

Like Sûrah 24:31 and 60 (see page 59), this concerns modesty. According to *The Study Quran*, the exact amount to be covered 'has been debated' (page 1038 column 1).

Sûrah 34 (from Mecca).

This section includes a story of the flooding of Sheba (Yemen; verses 15-17), seen as a punishment from God.

Sûrah 35 (from Mecca). excerpts

This section speaks of the power of the Creator.

Sûrah 35:7 *'Those who disbelieve, theirs will be a severe punishment. And those who believe and perform righteous deeds, theirs will be forgiveness and a great reward.'*

Sûrah 35:37 *'They cry out therein [in hell], "Our Lord! Remove us, that we may work righteousness other than that which we used to do." Did We not give you long life, enough for whoever would reflect to reflect therein? And the warner [Muhammad] came unto you to taste [the punishment]! The wrongdoers will have no helpers.'*

See pages 28-30 for an analysis of the constant references to hell in the Qur'an.

Sûrah 36 (from Mecca). excerpts

The Study Quran states: 'Several scholars maintain that Ya Sin (the title for this sûrah) is the heart of the Qur'an because it addresses its central teachings regarding God, prophethood and the Hereafter. The sûrah begins with an address to the Prophet that clarifies both his mission and the nature of revelation' (page 1069).

Sûrah 36:1-6 *'By the Wise Qur'an, truly thou are among the message bearers, upon a straight path, a revelation of the Mighty, the Merciful, that thou mayest warn a people whose fathers were not warned, so they were heedless.'*

Sûrah 36:12 *'Truly We give life to the dead and record that which they have sent forth and that which they have left behind [their good deeds]. And We have counted all things in a clear registry.'*

Paul speaks of the 'book of life' in which the names of those who have done good are registered (Philippians 4:3). It is an expression found, too, in the Book of Revelation, the Apocalypse: 'I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books' (Revelation 20:12).

Sûrah 36:82-83 *'His Command, when he desires a thing, is only to say it, "Be!" and it is. So glory be to Him in whose hand lies the dominion of all things, and unto Whom you will be returned.'*

Sûrah 37 (from Mecca).

This section refers to Noah (verses 75-82), Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac (verses 83-112), Moses and Aaron (verses 114-122), Elijah (verses 123-132), Lot (verses 133-138) and Jonah (verses 139-148).

The stories from the Jewish Scriptures speak of God's punishment. The Qur'an identifies this punishment as the fire of hell. See pages 28-30 where we looked at hell in the Qur'an and in the New Testament.

Sûrah 38 (from Mecca).

This section highlights the rejection that Muhammad was receiving from the polytheists. He sees himself as like Noah, who was also rejected (verses 13-17). It speaks of David who was *'forever turning in repentance'* (verses 18-27), and of Solomon (verses 31-41), and Job (verses 41-45). Like Muhammad they suffered trials. It mentions *'Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'* (verse 46), *'Ishmael and Elisha'* (verse 48).

Sûrah 38:52 includes in the joys of heaven *'maidens of modest gaze, of like age'*. We looked at this when examining the relations of men and women in the Qur'an (see page 25).

Sûrah 39 (mostly from Mecca).

Sûrah 39:12 *'I have been commanded to be the first of those who submit'* [*Muslimûn*].

Sûrah 39:53 [said by many to from Medina] *'O My servants who have been prodigal to the detriment of their own souls! Despair not of God's Mercy. Truly God forgives all sins. Truly, He is the Forgiving, the Merciful.'*

For a reflection of forgiveness and mercy see the commentary on Sûrah 3:89 (page 37).

Sûrah 39:70 *'Each soul is paid in full for what it did. And He is best aware of what they do.'*

Muhammad has a lot to say about the final Judgment – hell for those who would not submit (especially verses 71-72), and heaven for the believers (especially verses 73-75). See pages 29-30 where we looked at hell in the Qur'an and in the New Testament.

Sûrah 40 (from Mecca).

This section speaks of a member of Pharaoh's court, a believer, who tried to persuade Pharaoh to heed Moses (verses 28-45). It speaks of Noah (verse 31) and Joseph (verse 34). Hell is a major theme of the section. See comment on page 29.

Sûrah 40:2-3 *'The revelation of the Book from God, the Mighty, the Knower, Forgiver of sins, Acceptor of repentance, severe in retribution, Possessed of Bounty. There is no God but He.'*

Sûrah 40:7 *'Those who bear the Throne, and those who dwell nigh unto it, hymn the praises of their Lord and believe in Him and seek forgiveness for those who believe: Our Lord! You encompass all things in Mercy and Knowledge. Forgive those who repent and follow Your way, and shield them from the punishment of Hellfire' (verse 7).*

Sûrah 40:60 *'Your Lord has said: "Call upon Me, and I will respond to you. Truly those who are too arrogant to worship Me, they will enter hell debased.'*

Sûrah 41 (from Mecca).

This section speaks of the punishment sent by God on those who refused to heed God's revelation through earlier Arab prophets. Muhammad repeats a constant theme: punishment in hell for those who reject the words that comes to them through Muhammad (see comments on page 33).

Sûrah 41:6 *'I am only a human being like you. It is revealed to me that your God is only one God. So go straight to Him and seek forgiveness from Him. Woe to the idolaters.'*

Muhammad constantly insists on his role as God's final prophet, the seal of the prophets. Consistent with his conviction that there is only one God, he stresses here his humanity. Behind this may be his misunderstanding of the Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus. He wants his followers to *'Go straight to God and seek forgiveness from God.'*

Sûrah 42 (from Mecca).

Sûrah 42:13-15 *'God has prescribed for you as religion that which He enjoined upon Noah, and that which We revealed to thee, and that which We enjoined upon Abraham, Moses and Jesus, that you uphold religion and not become divided therein. Grievous for the idolaters is that to which thou callest them. God chooses for Himself whomsoever He will, and guides unto Himself whosoever turns in repentance. They [Jews and Christians] did not become divided till after knowledge had come to them, out of envy among themselves. And were it not for a Word that had preceded from thy Lord unto a term appointed, judgment would have been made between them. Yet truly those who were bequeathed the Book after them are indeed confounded by doubt regarding it. Therefore, summon and stand firm as thou hast been commanded. Follow not their caprices, and say, "I believe in that which God has sent down from a Book, and I have been commanded to establish justice among you. God is our Lord and your Lord. Unto us our deeds, and unto you your deeds; there is no argument between us and you. God will gather us together, and unto Him is the journey's end.'*

Sûrah 42:24 *'Truly God knows what lies within breasts.'*

Sûrah 42:42 *'There is only one way against those who wrong people and behave tyrannically upon the earth without right. For them there will be a painful punishment'*

Sûrah 43 (from Mecca).

Sûrah 43:59 *'The son of Mary was naught but a servant whom We blessed and whom We made an example for the Children of Israel.'*

It is true that Jesus saw himself as God's servant. He is always proclaiming his complete dependence upon God and his complete obedience. Muhammad, however, is attacking the Christian teaching of Jesus' divinity – a teaching he misunderstands (see pages 18ff).

Sûrah 43:63 *'When Jesus brought clear proofs he said: I have come to you with wisdom, and to make clear to you some of that concerning which you differ. So reverence God, and obey me.'*

Sûrah 44 (from Mecca).

Sûrah 44:54 describes one of the rewards in Paradise: *'We shall wed them to wide-eyed (perhaps better 'black-eyed') maidens.'*

We examined this passage, along with others like it, when reflecting on the relationship between men and women in the Qur'an (see page 26).

Sûrah 45 (from Mecca).

Sûrah 45:18 *'We placed thee upon a clear path.'*

The Arabic word translated here as 'clear path' is *shari'ah* [an avenue that leads to water]. It is the only time this word occurs in the Qur'an. It came to be used for Muslim law, which places those who submit *'on a clear path.'*

Sûrah 45 stresses a theme that recurs often in the Qur'an: God as creator and judge.

Sûrah 45:23 *'Hast thou considered one who takes his caprice as his god, God having led him astray knowingly, and sealed his hearing and his heart, and placed a cover upon his sight?'*

The image behind 'caprice' is a wind that blows a person off course, causing a fall. The Qur'an consistently sees events as issuing from God who controls creation. If a person is blown off course, it is God who had decided it to be that way.

The God whom Jesus reveals is very different: 'He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous' (Matthew 5:45)

Sûrah 46 (from Mecca).

Sûrah 46:9 *'Say, "I am no innovation among the messengers, and I know not what will be done with me or with you. I only follow that which has been revealed to me, and I am naught but a clear warner.'*

Muhammad saw himself as believing what was revealed to Moses and to Jesus and bringing their revelations to completion. His mission was to warn people of the consequences if they fail to heed God's final revelation coming to them through him.

Sûrah 46:15 speaks of the doom awaiting those who do not believe and who are not among those who submit (the *Muslimun*).

Sûrah 47 (from Medina).

Sûrah 47:2 *'Those who believe and perform righteous deeds, and believe what has been sent down unto Muhammad – and it is the truth from their Lord – He has absolved them from their evil deeds and set their state aright.'*

Those who believe in God and in the revelation given them through Muhammad, and 'perform righteous deeds' have their sins forgiven.

We Christians have a similar belief. When a person genuinely converts to Christianity and is welcomed into the community in Baptism, all his or her previous sins are absolved. We are, in Paul's words: 'justified by faith' (Romans 3:28), 'justified by God's grace as a gift' (Romans 3:24). Faith is not something we do. It is something we receive. It is Jesus' own faith in God that we receive as a gift, and it enables us to share in Jesus' communion with God.

Sûrah 47:4 *'When you meet those who disbelieve, strike at their necks; then, when you have overwhelmed them, tighten the bonds. Then free them graciously or hold them for ransom, till war lays down its burdens. Thus [shall it be].'*

See pages 27ff for an analysis of the Qur'an's teaching on God's authorisation of violence in defence of and propagation of Islam.

Sûrah 47:4-6 *'As for those who are slain in the way of God, He will not make their deeds go astray. He will guide them and set their state aright, and cause them to enter the Garden, having made it known to them.'*

It is verses such as these that are used to justify and encourage suicide bombers.

Sûrah 47:33-34 *'O you who believe! Obey God and obey the Messenger, and let not your deeds be in vain. Truly, those who disbelieve and turn from the way of God, then die when they are disbelievers, God will not forgive them.'*

Throughout the Qur'an, and essential to Islam, is the teaching that people cannot obey God unless they obey Muhammad.

Christians would use similar language in regard to Jesus, but the basis for the belief is different. In Islam it is through Muhammad that God reveals God's will, and it is expressed in the Qur'an. In Christianity, Jesus in his person is God's Self-revelation. To see Jesus is to see how God has chosen to reveal God's self in a human being. Our sacred literature, the New Testament, is an inspired response to Jesus. It is not itself God's revelation, and so can be, in fact must be, understood according to the rules of literary interpretation. The Scriptures were born in a particular culture and must be understood in their context.

Sûrah 48 (from Medina).

The occasion for this sûrah was a truce that permitted the Muslims to enter Mecca and go to the Ka'bah. This enabled the pilgrims to mix with the people of Mecca and many joined the Muslims.

Sûrah 48:8-9 *'Truly, We have sent thee as a witness and a bearer of glad tidings and as a warner, that mankind may believe in God and His Messenger, and support Him and honour Him, and that you may glorify Him morning and evening.'*

Sûrah 48:28 *'He it is Who sent His Messenger with guidance and the Religion of Truth, to make it prevail over all religion'* (see the commentary on Sûrah 9:33, page 48).

Sûrah 49 (from Medina)

This is concerned with showing respect to Muhammad, and how Muslims should treat each other as brothers.

Sûrah 49:7 *'Know that the Messenger of God is among you. Were he to obey you in many matters, you would suffer. But God has caused you to love faith and has made it seem fair in your hearts, and He has caused you to despise disbelief, iniquity and disobedience. Such are they who have been rightly guided.'*

Sûrah 49:9 *'If two parties among the believers fall to fighting, make peace between them. If one of them aggresses against the other, fight those who aggress until they return to God's command. If they return, make peace between them with justice, and act equitably.'*

This is an enlightened policy for seventh century Arabia.

Sûrah 49:14 *'The Bedouin say, "We believe." Say, "You believe not. Rather say, 'We have submitted,' for belief has not yet entered your hearts. Yet if you obey God and His Messenger, He will not diminish for you aught of your deeds. Truly God is Forgiving, Merciful.'*

The Study Quran states: 'This verse indicates that belief is of a higher rank than submission, that faith has degrees, and that tribal affiliations are superseded by those of faith' (page 1262 column 2).

Sûrah 49:15 *'Only they are believers who believe in God and His Messenger, then do not doubt, and strive [jahada] with their wealth and their lives in the way of God. It is they who are the truthful.'*

See pages 27ff where we examined the use of 'jahada' in the Qur'an. It speaks of striving to submit to God's will, including God's will that the Muslims use force to defend and propagate Islam.

Sûrah 50 (from Mecca).

Sûrah 50:28 *'Dispute not before Me, since I have already presented unto you the Threat.'*

The Study Quran states: "Some read threat here as a reference to the Qur'an, since to warn people of the impending punishment is considered a function of all revelation and is a central theme of the Qur'an' (page 1269, column 1).

Sûrah 50:39-40 *'Bear patiently what they say, and hymn the praise of your Lord before the rising of the sun and before the setting. And at night glorify Him, and after prostrations'*

Sûrah 51 (from Mecca).

This tells the story of the heavenly guests who told Abraham that he would have a son (verses 24-31). It speaks also of the destruction of Sodom (verses 32-37), and of Pharaoh's army in the sea (verses 38-40), and Noah (verses 46-50). These are among Muhammad's recurring stories that warn people of the punishment that awaits them if they do not believe and submit to God's will as revealed through Moses, through Jesus, and now, finally, through Muhammad, the 'seal of the prophets' (see Sûrah 33:40).

Sûrah 52 (from Mecca).

Sûrah 52:7-8 *'Truly, thy Lord's Punishment shall come to pass. None can avert it.'*

Sûrah 53 (from Mecca).

Sûrah 53:1-18 speaks of Muhammad's visions

Sûrah 54 (from Mecca).

Much of this sûrah focuses on divine warnings of punishment. 'Warnings' occurs 11 times.

Sûrah 54:17 *'In truth, We have made the Qur'an easy to remember, so is there any who remembers?'*

Sûrah 55 (from Mecca).

The Sûrah speaks of 'The Compassionate' (*al-Rahmân*). It is a hymn of praise of the Creator, who transcends God's wonderful creation.

Among the pleasures in store for believers are *'maidens of modest gaze, whom neither man nor jinn has ever touched'* (verse 56), *'good and beautiful ones'* (verse 70), *'maidens secluded in pavilions'* (verse 72), *'untouched as yet by man or jinn'* (verse 74). *'They recline upon green cushions and beautiful wonders'* (verse 76).

We examined this and similar passages when we reflected on the Qur'an's teaching on the relations between men and women (see page 26).

Sûrah 56 (from Mecca).

This Sûrah is concerned with Judgment. It describes the condition of 'the Foremost' in the Gardens of Delight on the Day of Judgment (verses 10-23).

Sûrah 56:17-22 lists among the joys of Paradise: *'Immortal youths wait upon them with goblets, ewers and a cup from a flowing spring ... with fruits as they choose and the meat of birds as they desire, and wide-eyed maidens, the likeness of concealed pearls.'*

On the right hand (verses 27-37) are *'virgins, amorous peers'* (verses 36-37).

On the left hand (verses 41-43) *'scorching wind and boiling liquid, and the shadow of black smoke'* (verses 42-43).

Of the reward in heaven Paul writes: 'no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him' (1 Corinthians 2:9). The reward is to be with the Risen Jesus in the embrace of God.

Sûrah 57 (from Medina).

Sûrah 57:16 *'Has not the time come for those who believe for their hearts to be humbled to the remembrance of God and the truth that has come down, and to be not like those who were given the Book aforesaid? But the span of time was too long for them, such that their hearts hardened and many of them are iniquitous.'*

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

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

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

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

There has been a shift since the judgment of Christians in Sûrah 5:82: *'Thou wilt surely find the nearest in affection toward those who believe to be those who say, "We are Christians". That is because among them are priests and monks, and because they are not arrogant.'*

Sûrah 58 (from Medina).

This is a revelation in response to a woman who complained to Muhammad that her husband had sent her away for no good reason.

Sûrah 59 (from Medina).

This sûrah refers to the Banu Nadr, a Jewish tribe of Medina, who were exiled for having broken their treaty, and had their property confiscated. In his biography of Muhammad, Ibn Hisham (died 833AD) describes how Muhammad participated in the beheading of more than six hundred males of another Jewish tribe, the Banu Quraydha (see *Interroger L'Islam* by Abbé Guy Pagès, page 171).

Sûrah 59:6 *'God grants His messengers authority over whomsoever He will, and God is Powerful over all things.'*

Muhammad asserts his divinely granted authority as God's final Messenger.

Sûrah 60 (from Medina).

Sûrah 60:1 *'O you who believe! Do not take Mine enemy and your enemy as friends' (awliya').*

Any religion that identifies its enemies as being God's enemies is on dangerous ground (see page 15). On page 24 we examined the various ways the Arabic *awliya'* is interpreted. This verse, and others like it, can be interpreted as requiring a Muslim not to accept a non-Muslim as governor, something that poses obvious problems for a non-Muslim democratic government.

Sûrah 60:7-9 *'It may be that God will forge affection between you and those of them with whom you are in enmity. God is Powerful and God is Forgiving, Merciful. God does not forbid you, with regard to those who did not fight you on account of religion and did not expel you from your homes, from treating them righteously and being just toward them. Truly God loves the just. God only forbids you with those who fought you on account of religion and expelled you from your homes, and supported your expulsion, from befriending them; whoever befriends them, they are the wrongdoers.'*

In seventh century Arabia this presents an enlightened view. As we saw on page 14, it falls short of Jesus' teaching that we are to love our enemies because God loves them.

Sûrah 61 (?).

Sûrah 61:6 *'When Jesus, son of Mary, said: O Children of Israel! Truly I am the Messenger of God unto you, confirming that which came before me in the Torah, and bearing glad tidings of a Messenger to come after me, whose name is 'Ahmad ('more praiseworthy').'*

We examined this statement on page 12.

Sûrah 61:9 *'God sent His Messenger with guidance and the Religion of Truth to make it prevail over all religion.'*

'Religion of Truth' is understood as the religion of Abraham, revealed to Moses, Jesus, and culminating in Muhammad.

Sûrah 61:14 *'O you who believe! Be helpers of God, just as Jesus, son of Mary, said to the apostles, "Who are my helpers to God?" The apostles replied, "We are helpers to God". Then a group from the Children of Israel believed, and a group disbelieved. So we strengthened those who believed against their enemies, and they came to prevail.'*

The Qur'an is referring to Jews who believed by becoming Muslims, and so prevailed.

Sûrah 62 (probably from Medina).

Sûrah 62:9-10 *'O you who believe! When you are called to the congregational prayer, hasten to the remembrance of God and leave off trade. That is better for you, if you but knew. And when prayer is completed, disperse throughout the land and seek the Bounty of God, and remember God much, that haply you may prosper.'*

Communal Prayer is one of the five pillars of Islam (see page 14).

Sûrah 63 (from Medina).

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

The image of God here is very different from that revealed by Jesus. See our commentary on Sûrah 3:84 (page 38), Sûrah 9:80 (page 49), and Sûrah 17:25 (page 53).

Sûrah 63:9 *'O you who believe! Let neither your property nor your children divert you from the remembrance of God.'*

Jesus taught us: 'Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well' (Matthew 6:33).

Sûrah 64 (?).

Sûrah 64:10 *'Those who disbelieve and deny Our signs, they are inhabitants of the Fire, abiding therein. What an evil journey's end!'*

See pages 32ff for a comparison of the Muslim and the Christian teaching on hell.

Sûrah 65 (from Medina).

Sûrah 65:1-2 *'When you divorce your wives, divorce them for the waiting period [three months], and count well the waiting period, and reverence your Lord. Expel women not from their houses; nor shall they depart, unless they commit a flagrant indecency. These are the limits set by God ... When they have fulfilled their term, take them back in an honourable way or separate from them in an honourable way. And call two just persons among yourselves to witness and uphold the testimony for God.'*

In the Arab Bedouin culture, as in many cultures, only the male had the power to divorce. Jesus spoke out against this practice in Judaism of his day (see Mark 10:2-11). Paul deals with the issue of divorce in his First Letter to the Christian community in Corinth (7:10-16).

He acknowledges that there is a place for divorce in certain circumstances. He stresses the importance of peace between husband and wife, and also the importance of being free to follow one's faith. This is not the place to analyse the important nuances of Paul's teaching. His Letter needs careful reading.

Sûrah 65:7 *'God tasks no soul beyond that which He has given it. God will bring ease after hardship.'* (see also Sûrah 2:286, page 37).

Paul has a similar statement: *'God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it'* (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Sûrah 66 (from Medina).

Sûrah 66:1-2 *'O Prophet! Why dost thou forbid that which God has made lawful unto thee, seeking the good pleasure of your wives? And God is Forgiving, Merciful. God has already ordained for you the absolution of your oaths, and God is your Master. He is the Knower, the Wise.'*

On page 26, when examining the position of women in the Qur'an, we commented on this passage, and on others like it.

Sûrah 66:12 presents Mary as an example to Muhammad's wives: *'Mary, the daughter of 'Imrân, preserved her chastity [see Sûrah 21:91]. Then We breathed therein of Our Spirit, and she confirmed the Words of her Lord and His Books, and was among the devoutly obedient.'*

Sûrah 67 (from Mecca).

This section highlights one of Muhammad's central convictions. He is sent to warn people. If they do not heed the warning, hell awaits them (see pages 28-30).

Sûrah 68 (from Mecca).

Those who refuse belief consider Muhammad to be *'possessed'* (verses 2 and 51), whereas he is *'naught else than a reminder for the worlds'* (verse 52).

Sûrah 69 (from Mecca).

This is yet another sûrah on the final judgment (see page 30): either *'enjoying a contented life, in a lofty Garden with low-hanging clusters'* (verses 21-23), or *'Hellfire'* (verse 31), for those who, among other things *'did not urge feeding the indigent'* (verse 34).

Sûrah 70 (from Mecca).

Another sûrah on the judgment. Hell is *'a churning fire, ripping away the scalp'* (verses 15-16).

Sûrah 71 (from Mecca).

It is clear from the way the story of Noah is told that Muhammad sees himself as carrying on the prophetic mission of Noah. Those who reject Muhammad's revelation will suffer the same fate as Noah's contemporaries.

Sûrah 72 (from Mecca).

This surah refers to the 'Jinn'(verse 1), elemental spirits of a lower order than the angels. Some were understood to have been enlightened by Muhammad and converted to Islam.

Sûrah 72:23 *'Whoever disobeys God and His Messenger, his shall be the Fire of Hell, abiding therein forever.'*

Sûrah 72:26-28 *'Knower of the Unseen, He does not disclose His Unseen to anyone, save to the one whom He approves as a messenger. Then He dispatches before him and behind him a guard, that He may know that they have indeed conveyed the messages of their Lord. And He encompasses whatever is with them and keeps a numbered count of all things.'*

Sûrah 73 (from Mecca).

This sûrah describes how Muhammad rose from his bed and wrapped himself in a cloak to carry out a vigil.

Sûrah 74 (from Mecca).

Some claim that this was Muhammad's first experience of receiving words from God. Others claim this for Sûrah 96, verses 1-5. It is a warning to those who do not believe in the Day of Judgment.

Sûrah 75 (from Mecca).

This sûrah is about the power of God to raise the dead:

Sûrah 75:22-24 *'Faces that Day shall be radiant, gazing upon their Lord. And faces that Day shall be scowling, knowing that a spine-crushing calamity will befall them.'*

Sûrah 76 (from Medina).

Commentators suggest that this surah was revealed when Muhammad's family were fasting, having given their food to the *'indigent, the orphan and the captive'* (verse 8).

It speaks (as do many of these shorter sûrahs) of divine judgment

Sûrah 76:30-31 *'Truly God is Knowing, Wise. He causes whomsoever He will to enter into His Mercy. And as for the wrongdoers, He has prepared for them a painful punishment.'*

Sûrah 77 (from Mecca).

Sûrah 77:37-38 *'Woe that Day to the deniers. This is the Day of Division.'*

The 'Day of Division' is the Day of Judgment when the good will be rewarded and the bad punished.

Sûrah 78 (from Mecca).

Again, the Day of Judgment. It speaks of the blessings of Paradise.

Sûrah 78:31-34 *'Truly the reverent shall have a place of triumph, gardens and vineyards, buxom maidens of like age, and an overflowing cup.'*

We looked at this verse, and others like it, when examining the relationship between men and women in the Qur'an (see page 26).

Sûrah 78:40 *'Truly We have warned you of a punishment night, on a day when a man beholds what his hands have sent forth, and the disbeliever says: "Oh, would that I were dust".'*

Sûrah 79 (from Mecca).

This sûrah speaks of those being wrested from the love of what is other than God. It is yet another sûrah on the Day of Judgment

Sûrah 79:37-41 *'For one who rebels, and prefers the life of this world, truly Hellfire is the refuge. For one who fears standing before his Lord and forbids the soul from caprice, truly the Garden is the refuge.'*

Sûrah 80 (from Mecca).

Sûrah 80:38-42 *'Faces that Day shall be shining, radiant, laughing, joyous. And faces that Day shall be covered with dust, overspread with darkness., Those, they are the disbelievers, the profligates.'*

Sûrah 81 (from Mecca).

Another sûrah on judgment and the necessity to listen to Muhammad.

Sûrah 81:19-20 speaks of Muhammad's vision of *'a noble messenger, possessed of strength, before the Possessor of the Throne, of high rank'* (the Angel Gabriel).

Sûrah 82 (from Mecca).

More on the Day of Judgment.

Sûrah 82:13-15 *'Truly the pious shall be in bliss; and truly the profligate shall be in Hellfire, burning therein on the Day of Judgment.'*

Sûrah 83 (from Mecca).

Again on the Day of Judgment, with special reference to those who defraud others.

Sûrah 84 (from Mecca).

More on the Day of Judgment.

Sûrah 85 (from Mecca).

Sûrah 85:10-11 *'Truly those who persecute believing men and believing women, then do not repent, theirs shall be the punishment of Hell, and theirs shall be the punishment of the burning. Truly those who believe and perform righteous deeds, theirs shall be the Gardens with rivers running below: that is the supreme triumph'* (see Sûrahs 5:119 and 44:51-57).

Sûrah 86 (from Mecca).

Muhammad is told: *'Be gentle with the disbelievers; grant them respite for a while'* (verse 17).

This stands in stark contrast to many sûrahs from the Medina period.

Sûrah 87 (from ?).

Sûrah 87:15 is a call to *'remember the Name of the Lord [The Most High – al-A'la] and pray.'*

Sûrah 88 (from Mecca).

This sûrah speaks of the fate of those who believe and those who disbelieve. Muhammad is sent to warn them.

Sûrah 89 (?).

Sûrah 89:17-19 speaks of the fate of those who *'honour not the orphan [see Sûrahs 2:220; 4:2-3, 8-10, 127 and 6:152], and urge not the feeding of the indigent, and devour inheritance with rapacious devouring, and love wealth with abounding love.'*

A constant theme of the Qur'an is the call to care for the needy (see page 34).

'Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 19:23).

Sûrah 89:29-30 *'Enter among My servants. Enter My Garden.'*

Sûrah 90 (from Mecca).

Sûrah 90:13-20 *'The steep pass [a striving for God] is the freeing of a slave, or giving food at a time of famine to an orphan near of kin, or an indigent, clinging to the dust while being one of those who believe and exhort one another in patience, and exhort one another to compassion. Those are the companions of the right. And those who disbelieve in Our signs, they are the companions of the left. Upon them is a Fire enclosed.'*

On pages 29-30 we examined the Muslim and Christian call to care for the poor. We also examined the different approaches to divine judgment in the Qur'an and in the Christian Scriptures (pages 28-30).

Sûrah 91 (from Mecca).

Sûrah 91:7-10 *'By the soul and the One Who fashioned it and inspired it as to what makes it iniquitous or reverent. Indeed, he prospers who purifies it [the soul]. And indeed he fails who obscures it. He is indeed a failure who stunts it.'*

Sûrah 92 (from Mecca).

The Study Quran states: 'The central theme is one found in many of the shorter sûrahs, that human beings have diverse ends' (page 1522).

Sûrah 92:20-21 commends the person who *'seeks the Face of the Lord, the Most High, and surely He will be content.'*

Sûrah 93 (from Mecca). Quoted in full

These words came to Muhammad after an interval during which he received no words.

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

I find this one of the most beautiful of the sûrahs. Muhammad the orphan found his Guide and Protector in God, and was moved to proclaim to others the Lord's blessing.

Sûrah 94 (from Mecca). Quoted in full

Another very beautiful surah. Comfort is given to Muhammad at a time when he was being shunned and ridiculed.

Sûrah 94 *'Did We not expand for thee thy breast, and lift from thee thy burden that weighed heavily upon thy back? And did We not elevate thy renown? For truly with hardship comes ease! Truly with hardship comes ease! So when thou art free exert thyself; and let thy desire be for your Lord.'*

Sûrah 95 (from Mecca).

This is yet another short sûrah that speaks of God's judgment.

Sûrah 96 (from Mecca).

This appears to express Muhammad's first experience of receiving what he experienced as words from God (610AD). See *The Study Quran*, pages 1535-1536.

Sûrah 97 (from Mecca). Quoted in full

Sûrah 97 'Truly We sent it down in the Night of Power. And what shall apprise you of the Night of Power? The Night of Power is better than a thousand months. The angels and the Spirit descend therein, by the leave of their Lord, with every command; peace it is until the break of dawn.'

The Study Quran states: "There are over forty interpretations of what is meant by the *Night of Power*" (page 1540 column 1). It may be an acknowledgment of the impossibility of finding words to express the experience of revelation.

Sûrah 98 (?).

Sûrah 98:1-3, 6 'Those who disbelieve among the People of the Book and the idolaters will not desist until the clear proof comes to them, a messenger from God, reciting scriptures purified wherein are books upright ... Truly the disbelievers among the People of the Book and the idolaters are in the fire of Hell.'

Sûrah 99 (?).

This sûrah speaks of the earthquake issuing in the Day of Judgment.

Sûrah 100 (from Mecca).

God knows all that we do, and we will be judged on our submission.

Sûrahs 101-104 (from Mecca).

More very short sûrahs on judgment.

Sûrah 105 (from Mecca).

In the year of Muhammad's birth, 570AD, Abrahah, the ruler of the Abyssinian kingdom in Yemen, attacked Mecca intending to destroy the Ka'bah. He had to abandon the attack.

Sûrah 106 (from Mecca).

The sûrah speaks of God's protection of the Quraysh, because of the presence in Mecca of the Ka'bah.

Sûrah 107 (from Mecca). Quoted in full

Sûrah 107 *'Hast thou seen the one who denies religion? That is the one who drives away the orphan, and does not urge feeding the indigent. So, woe unto the praying who are heedless of their prayers, those who strive to be seen yet refuse small kindnesses.'*

Sûrah 108 (?). Quoted in full

Disbelievers taunted Muhammad that he had no son [his two sons died as children]

Sûrah 108 *'Truly We have bestowed abundant good upon thee. So pray to thy Lord and sacrifice. Truly thine enemy shall be the one without posterity.'*

Sûrah 109 (from Mecca). Quoted in full

Sûrah 109 *'Say, "O disbelievers! I worship not what you worship; nor are you worshippers of what I worship; nor am I a worshipper of what you worship; nor are you worshippers of what I worship. Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion".'*

Muhammad is being encouraged not to compromise.

Sûrah 110 (from Medina). Quoted in full

Sûrah 110 *'When God's Help and Victory come and you see mankind entering God's religion in throngs, hymn the praise of thy Lord, and seek forgiveness from Him. Truly He is Ever Relenting.'*

This is one of the last revelations received by Muhammad, given just prior to his death.

Sûrah 111 (from Mecca). Quoted in full

Sûrah 111 *'May the hands of Abu Lahab [one of Muhammad's opponents] perish, and may he perish! His wealth avails him not, nor what he has earned. He shall enter a blazing Fire. And his wife, carrier of firewood, upon her neck is a rope of palm fibre.'*

Sûrah 112 (?). Quoted in full

Sûrah 112 *'Say: "He, God, is One, God the Eternally Sufficient unto Himself. He begets not; nor was He begotten. And none is like unto Him".'*

Sûrah 113 (?). Quoted in full

Sûrah 113 *'Say, "I seek refuge in the Lord of the daybreak, from the evil of what He has created, from the evil of the darkness when it enshrouds, from the evil of those who blow upon knots [malignant witchcraft], and from the evil of the envier when he envies".'*

Sûrah 114 (?). Quoted in full

Sûrah 114 *'Say, "I seek refuge in the Lord of mankind, the King of mankind, the God of mankind, from the evil of the stealthy whisperer, who whispers into the breasts of mankind, from jinn and mankind.'*

Epilogue

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

Nothing that we experience has in itself sufficient reason to ground its existence. Everything is dependent. There must exist Being that is self-sufficient, and so not dependent. This is the Being we call 'God'.

Since God holds everything in existence, we can deduce certain things about God from what we know about things.

Christians believe that it is Jesus whose humanity best reveals God, and reveals God as Love - that is as Self-giving.

Clearly God transcends and understanding we can have or any words we can use to express our understanding.

It is essential that we humbly acknowledge that religious texts are human documents. We may cherish these texts as inspired by God, because we find them inspiring. Especially

significant here are the Sacred Writings of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, because for many hundreds of years they have continued to nourish people's lives. There is a temptation for the followers of a religious tradition to think of their foundational texts as coming directly from God. Lifted in this way above human authorship, the texts can be judged to avoid contextual analysis. If we are to contribute to the search for meaning, we must acknowledge this temptation and act against it. Such is our propensity for self-deception that we need each other's help if we are going to maintain the humility that is necessary in all that we say about God.

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

I pray that this paper may assist Muslims to find these same values in Christianity.

Islam had its beginnings in a violent world, which helps explain the inclusion in the Qur'an of instructions, purporting to come from God, to use every means, including violence, to protect and propagate Islam, the 'Religion of Truth'. Jesus, too, lived in a violent world. His response was to reveal God as Love and to teach us to love our neighbours, including our enemies. My prayer is that Christians will learn to follow Jesus in this, and that Muslims will see the statements in the Qur'an that support violence as a seventh century response that is understandable in the context, but that does not represent the will of God. Freed from this idea, Islam will be free to make its contribution to our search for meaning, and to the building of peace in this 'our common home'.

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

And now from two of my favourite sûrahs:

Sûrah 93 'By the morning brightness, and by the night when still, thy Lord has not forsaken thee; nor does He despise. And the Hereafter shall be better for thee than this life. And surely the Lord will give unto thee, and thou shalt be content. Did He not find thee an orphan and shelter, find thee astray and guide, and find thee in need and enrich? So as for the orphan scorn not. And as for one who requests, repel not. And as for the blessing of the Lord, proclaim!'

Muhammad the orphan found his Guide and Protector in God, and was moved to proclaim to others the Lord's blessing.

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

Amen.