

**KNOWING YOUR NEIGHBOUR:  
WHAT I WISH CHRISTIANS KNEW ABOUT MUSLIMS AND ISLAM  
- AND WHAT MUSLIMS KNEW ABOUT CHRISTIANS AND CHRISTIANITY**

Tværkulturelt Center, Copenhagen      Rev Colin Chapman      25th March 2019

### **Introduction**

My subject was suggested to me by the conference organizers - and I don't think I've spoken on this exact subject before. So this is a new challenge for me!

It's easy for me as a Christian to answer the second part, because I speak as a committed Christian and can speak freely from the heart. But it's harder to do the first part, since ideally a Muslim should be telling us what he/she wishes Christians knew about Muslims and Islam.

So I speak as a Christian who has been trying to engage with Muslims and Islam over a number of years, and has spent a lot of time trying to teach Christians about Islam. I'm not in the business of attacking Islam or trying to show how misguided it is, or trying to describe Islam at its worst.

When I'm talking to Christians, I try as far as possible to speak about Islam *as if Muslims were present*, because I'm trying to obey the 9<sup>th</sup> commandment: 'You shall not give false witness against your neighbour.' Many years ago I heard of an American Islamic scholar, William Bejlifeld, who was giving a lecture on Islam at which Muslims were present. After he finished, a Muslim said, 'That was a very fair presentation of Islam. So why don't you become a Muslim?' Bejlifeld then went on to explain why he was a Christian.

But before I attempt to answer the question, let me make the obvious point that the most basic thing that Christians and Muslims need to know about each other is that we are human beings, made in the image of God. We need to meet as fellow human beings before we meet as 'Christians' and 'Muslims.'

A good friend of mine used to say that whenever he was asked 'How do I talk to Muslims?', he would answer 'Hello! How are you?' Some years ago I was leading a seminar in Cambridge with Chawkat Moucarry. In the question time a very serious young student asked, 'Please can you tell us the secret of how to talk to Muslims.' Chawkat replied, with a broad smile, 'The first thing I would say is "Forget the fact that this person is a Muslim, and relate to him/her as a human being with a name – like Fatima or Ali."'

### **WHAT I WISH CHRISTIANS KNEW ABOUT MUSLIMS AND ISLAM**

So what are the things that I wish Christians knew about Islam? I could have talked about the diversity of Islam – Muslims are not all the same; about Sufism – the most attractive face of Islam for many in the West; about the great Islamic civilization that flourished in Baghdad until the 13<sup>th</sup> Century; about the way many Muslims are trying to create a contextualised form of Islam in

Europe; about Islamic culture; or about the generous hospitality of Muslims and their self-discipline in Ramadan. But after much thought I have chosen these five points.

## **1. THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL ISLAMIC BELIEFS ARE THE ONENESS OF GOD (*tawheed*), PROPHETHOOD (*risala*), and LIFE AFTER DEATH (*akhira*)**

This is how a small leaflet produced by the Muslim Educational Trust in London attempts to describe the most basic beliefs of Islam. I could have given you my summary of what Muslims believe; but it's much more powerful to hear it in their words:

The oneness of God: 'Everything in existence originates from the one and only Creator, who is the Sustainer and sole Source of Guidance. This belief should govern all aspects of human life. Recognition of this fundamental truth brings a unified view of life which rejects any division into religious and secular.'

We Christians would agree about the need for a unified view of life. But this emphasis on the oneness or unity of God is interpreted very literally by Muslims, and it rules out the possibility of the Trinity. For Muslims the idea of Jesus as the Son of God elevates a created being to the level of the Creator, which is blasphemy. And because they emphasise the difference between God and human kind – that God is 'wholly other' – they have difficulty with the idea that humankind is made in the image and likeness of God. Because of this difference, the idea that Almighty God should become a human being in the person of Jesus is unthinkable.

Prophethood: Allah has given us Guidance through a succession of 28 major prophets or messengers, all of whom brought the same message. Whenever the teachings of a prophet were distorted by people, Allah sent another prophet to bring them back to the Straight Path ... The chain of Prophethood began with Adam, included Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Lot, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, John the Baptist and Jesus, and ended with Muhammad, the final messenger to mankind.

Jesus is therefore simply one prophet in the line of prophets and messengers, the last before Muhammad, who is the seal of the prophets. And Jesus preached exactly the same message as Muhammad and all the other prophets. For Muslims our basic need is what they call 'guidance' – teaching about what God is like and about how we should live. There is no need for what we call reconciliation with God, and what we call redemption or the new birth.

Life after death: Many of the earliest revelations that came to Muhammad were about the Day of Judgement and included dire warnings to people who did not turn to God in repentance. The Qur'an contains many vivid descriptions of the pleasures of Paradise and the torments of hell. 'We are all accountable to Allah on the Day of Judgment, when we will be judged according to how we live our lives on this Earth. A person who obeys and worships Allah will be rewarded with a place of happiness in Paradise; the person who does not will be sent to Hell, a place of punishment and suffering.'

This emphasis on being judged according to our works rules out the possibility of what Christians call 'salvation' – the possibility that here in this life we can be reconciled to God and know that we are accepted as his sons and daughters.

Understanding these fundamental beliefs of Islam should enable us to appreciate the simplicity and rationality of Muslim belief. It should also enable us to recognise both the common ground Christians share with Muslims and the significant differences.

Incidentally I have often asked Christians how they would attempt to sum up the most fundamental Christian beliefs. Can we think of three or five words that sum up the most distinctive things about our Christian faith?

## **2. MUHAMMAD WAS TRYING TO GIVE THE ARABS A CONTEXTUALISED VERSION OF JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY**

I make this point because many Christians are so conscious of the ways in which Islam challenges and even denies basic Christian beliefs that they think of Islam as a religion inspired by the Devil. I don't for a moment want to suggest that these fundamental differences don't exist. But I believe it's important that we try to understand the context in which Islam came into being.

I have been greatly helped by the book *The Origins of Islam in its Christian Environment*, by a British Islamic scholar, Richard Bell, published in 1926. His basic argument, which I find convincing, is that Muhammad thought of himself as a prophet to the Arabs, a prophet who was giving the Arabs an Arab version of Judaism and Christianity. He had many dealings with the three Jewish tribes in Medina, and must have met with some Christians in Mecca and the surrounding tribes and with many more when he went as a young man on his trading journeys to Palestine and Syria. He must also have been aware that Arabia was surrounded by the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia, the Coptic Christians in Egypt, and Christians of many kinds in Palestine, Syria, Byzantium, Iraq and the Gulf.

The Jews of Medina were no doubt very possessive of their Hebrew scriptures and saw no need to translate them into Arabic. And most scholars agree that the New Testament had not been translated in Arabic by the time of Muhammad. So Muhammad probably saw himself as a prophet called by God to give the Arabs a contextualised version of these two monotheistic religions – and to give it to them in their mother tongue of Arabic.

He seems to have thought and hoped at the beginning that the Jews and Christians around him would recognise him as a prophet in the line of the Old Testament prophets and of Jesus. He was therefore probably very surprised that neither the Jews nor the Christians would recognise him as a prophet. When this happened, the revelations that he believed he was receiving from God became more and more critical and confrontational, so that he distanced himself more and more from both Jews and Christians.

The Jewish tribes in Medina were severely punished for siding with the pagan Meccas, and on one occasion more than 600 Jewish men were put to death and their wives and children banished. Many verses in the Qur'an are extremely critical of Jews. While several earlier verses are positive about Christians, later verses are much more confrontational and hostile. It was reported in the earliest biographies of the Prophet and Hadith literature that, before his death, Muhammad gave the order 'Two religions shall not exist together in the peninsula of the Arabs' – implying that Jews and Christians should be driven out of Arabia. As Islamic doctrines were articulated in later centuries,

they emphasised even more strongly differences from Christian beliefs. And after the Crusades, the attitudes of Muslims towards Christians hardened very significantly.

I believe it's important, however, not to read these hardened and hostile attitudes back into the earlier period of Muhammad's ministry. Did Muhammad meet Christians who really understood their faith? Were these Christians orthodox in their belief, or were they heretical or unorthodox? Did he really understand Christian beliefs? If he did know and understand Christian beliefs about Jesus, did he deliberately change them and give them a different twist to make them fit into his own world-view? We don't know! Today of course we have to deal with Muslims and the beliefs that they hold as they are – not as they might have been centuries ago. But being aware of how Islamic belief has developed in the earliest period and in later centuries should open up new possibilities of dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

### **3. THE KINGDOM OF GOD NEEDS TO BE EXPRESSED AND EMBODIED IN SOCIETY**

This is where I believe it's helpful to recognise how much Islam owes to Judaism. In his dealing with the Jews of Medina, Muhammad must have learned a great deal about their scriptures and their way of life. He must, for example, have observed their fasting and their dietary laws. For several years he and his followers prayed in the direction of Jerusalem, and it was only after he received a special revelation from God that they began to pray in the direction of the *Ka'ba* at Mecca.

After the Hijra when Muhammad moved from Mecca to Medina, he was both the prophet and the statesman. The theocratic state in Medina was therefore very similar to the theocracy of the Old Testament. The instructions that Moses believed he had received from God covered not only the moral law of the 10 Commandments, but detailed legislation about marriage, divorce, inheritance, injuries, property ownership, worship and hygiene. If the Tabernacle was the sign that the holy God wanted to live among his people, the law elaborated what it meant for the people to be holy and how they were to organise their community life in accordance with God's requirements.

We should also point out that Muhammad must have been aware that there were Christian states surrounding Arabia. Across the Red Sea there was the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia, and when he and his followers were being persecuted in Mecca, he sent a group of 15 of them to seek asylum there. He must also have been aware also that there was a great Christian kingdom centred in Byzantium.

The Islamic state which Muhammad established in Medina has been seen by many, if not most, Muslims for centuries as a model of how a God-fearing community should function. While Muhammad's role as the receiver of the revelation ended with his death, the four Rightly Guided Caliphs who succeeded him maintained his role as political leaders. Throughout Islamic history there was a certain separation of powers between the head of state and the religious leaders, the *ulema*. But the head of state was bound to uphold *shari'a* law, while the religious leaders swore allegiance to the head of state. The Islamic state was therefore an expression of the kingdom of God on earth.

And how do we as Christians today respond to this thinking? When Jesus said to Pilate, 'My kingdom is not of this world' (John 18:36), he was refusing to identify the kingdom of God with any political system. Muslims, however, seem to be saying 'But surely the kingdom of God must

belong to this world! It does need to be expressed and demonstrated in some visible way in any Muslim community.’ So if Christians today think that the kingdom of God is about me and my relationship with God, Muslims reject this individualism and stress the importance of the whole community living in accordance with the law of God. They really do want God to be honoured in the public sphere. The cry *Allahu akbar*, means literally ‘God is greater, greater than any ideas we have of him’, and it expresses the desire ‘Let God be God!’ Muslims in the West are therefore living in a very unusual situation. For many centuries in the past Muslims could hardly have imagined the situation we have today in which at least a quarter of the House of Islam are living in the West as minority communities in secularised societies.

Christians and Muslims are all praying for the kingdom of God to come on earth. But we have different idea of how that kingdom comes. We believe that the kingly rule of God began in the coming of Jesus. We would also want to point out that history is full of examples of what happens when religion and the state are too closely intertwined. How can godliness and piety be enforced by law? We have great difficulty with the idea of the religious police in Iran punishing women for not wearing the *hijab* correctly. We have great difficulty with the idea of a revived caliphate demanding the allegiance of all Muslims and Muslim-majority countries all over the world. And we wonder how many Muslims around the world would agree that Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran give us models of what an Islamic state should be. But at the very least we need to try to understand the instinct of Muslims who believe that God wants to see not just God-fearing individuals, but God-fearing communities, societies and nations.

#### **4. MUSLIMS HAVE SOME VERY GENUINE GRIEVANCES**

Last Sunday I attended a vigil in the centre of Cambridge, at which we remembered the victims of the shootings in New Zealand. One of the Muslim speakers mentioned the Uyghars in China and the Rohinja in Burma/Myanmar. We could add to the list the Muslims of Kashmir who believe that they have suffered from the central government in India. And by now we may have forgotten about the Muslims of Chechnya, who were brutally suppressed by the Russian regime, and the Muslims of Kosovo who suffered at the hands of the Christian Serbs.

Iran is often in the news today because of the new cold war in which Sunni Muslims feel they must defend themselves against the Shi’ite regime of Iran which has been trying to exert its influence over the whole region. But it’s good to be reminded of the role that the West has played in the recent history of Iran. In the 19<sup>th</sup> C Britain and Russia were both trying to control the country directly or indirectly. And how many of us know or remember that in 1953 the American CIA and the British MI6 engineered a coup d’etat to remove Mossadeq, the first democratically elected leader of Persia? That coup led to the return of the Shah, who was supported by the USA and Britain. And the Shah’s dictatorial rule was followed by Ayatollah Khomeini. Western powers in recent years have said that they were working to see democracy spreading in the Middle East. But here were we bringing down a democratically elected government. And why? Because we did not want them to take a larger share of the revenues from oil.

I suspect that the issue that is at the top of the list of grievances of many Muslims is Israel-Palestine. This conflict has continued for so many years without resolution and is still near the heart of many of the conflicts of the Middle East. In 1880, when the Zionist movement began, Jews were less than 5% of the total population of Palestine. When the settler colonialist movement brought in

more and more Jews seeking refuge from anti-semitism in Europe, the Palestinians were bound to feel that they were being dispossessed by a group of people who wanted eventually to be the majority and to create a Jewish state. Arabs and Muslims find it hard to understand how, because of unquestioning American support for Israel, the UN has not been able to resolve the conflict on the basis of international law.

After 9/11 all of us in the western world – and especially the Americans – should have asked ourselves the question ‘Why are these people so angry? And do they have good reason to be angry?’ My own answer would be, ‘Yes, in some cases they have good reason to be angry.’ So I believe that any discussion among ourselves or with Muslims about Islamic extremism must include a recognition of the way we in the West have started and contributed to these conflicts in different parts of the world.

## **5. MUSLIMS PRESENT HUGE CHALLENGES TO US IN THE WEST**

The person who I believe has helped us most to recognise this issue is Lesslie Newbigin. After many years as a missionary and bishop in India, he returned to the UK in 1974 and was very active in Birmingham as a teacher, writer and pastor until his death in 1998. In the UK, he felt he was facing just as big a challenge as he had faced with Hinduism in India. He believed that as a result of the Enlightenment, Christianity had become a totally privatised religion and withdrawn more and more from the public sphere.

In the last years of his life he was especially aware of the challenges presented by Islam, because he could see that the secular world and the Christian world were finding it hard to know how to respond. In a society where religion had been moved to the sidelines, here were people who actually wanted God to be honoured in the public sphere. They believed that there is such a thing as truth, and wanted to present their faith to others as the truth. Away back in 1994 he wrote: ‘I do not believe that a secular society has the spiritual resources to meet the challenge of Islam.’

But Newbigin was just as strong in his challenge to Christians who were hesitant about proclaiming their faith as truth, and who had withdrawn from the public sphere.

It’s important, therefore, that in Europe today we recognise that any Christian-Muslim dialogue takes place in a very secularised context. There are now three very different parties involved. We Christians will sometimes feel that we have more in common with God-fearing Muslims than with totally secularised Europeans who have no time for God. We ought therefore to be in a position to act as mediators, interpreters and bridge-builders. We ought to be able to help the secular world to understand Muslims. And we ought to be able to help Muslims to understand the secular mind.

## **WHAT I WISH MUSLIMS KNEW ABOUT CHRISTIANS AND CHRISTIANITY**

### **1. WHO JESUS IS**

Jesus in the Qur’an is a prophet and messenger who, like Muhammad, proclaimed the message of Islam. Although he is just one in a line of 28 major prophets and messengers, he is quite unique in certain respects: he was created in the womb of Mary by the word of God without a human father;

he is called ‘God’s word and a spirit from him’, and ‘among those brought near to God’; unlike Muhammad, he worked miracles of healing and raising the dead; he was not crucified, but rescued from death when God took him to heaven. So at the very least we share with Muslims their belief in the virgin birth and the miracles of Jesus.

When talking to Muslims about Jesus, however, our first task usually is to remove misunderstandings. If they think that the trinity consists of God the Father, the Virgin Mary and their son Jesus, we have to explain that this idea is as blasphemous to us as it is to them. If they think that we call Jesus ‘the Son of God’ because there was some kind of sexual relationship between God and Mary, this is as unthinkable to us as it is to them.

When we call Jesus ‘Son of God’, we’re using the language of metaphor. At its very simplest we’re saying that Jesus is like God in a way that no human being can be. Our saying ‘like father like son’ points to the fact that there’s often a strong likeness between children and their parents. But we’re not just saying that Jesus is like God; we are also saying that God is like Jesus. So if we want to know what God is like, we look at Jesus. He – in his life, his character, his teaching, his death and resurrection - gives us the clearest possible picture that we can have of God. The incarnation gives us a much fuller revelation of the holiness and love of God than words communicated to the mind of a prophet. The Apostle John could write: ‘the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory ...’ (John 1: 14). Muslims, however, could only say ‘the Word was made book, made Qur’an.’

Muslims tend to think that because God is so totally different from humankind, incarnation is impossible. But we believe that since we are made in the image and likeness of God, there is a basic likeness between God and humankind. Because of this, the incarnation becomes possible and thinkable. So I sometimes feel like saying to a Muslim ‘If Almighty God has chosen to reveal himself not only through prophethood but also through incarnation, who are you to tell him what he can do and what he cannot do?’

Many of us will no doubt have been challenged by Muslims, ‘We Muslims believe in Jesus. So why don’t you Christians believe in Muhammad?’ In my response I want to ask if they have begun to understand what we see in Jesus, because if they understood this, they might not ask the question. We believe that in Jesus we see the fullest possible revelation of God. So if God has revealed himself so fully in this way, how could he want to reveal something more or something new six centuries later?’ If I know the person I’m speaking to, I might go on to ask ‘Would you light a candle when the sun is shining?’

## **2. WE ARE MONOTHEISTS, NOT TRITHEISTS**

The English translation of one of the key verses in the Qur’an reads like this: ‘They do blaspheme who say, “God is Christ the son of Mary.” But said Christ: “O Children of Israel! Worship God, my Lord and your Lord.’ Whoever joins other gods with God, God will forbid him the Garden, and the Fire will be his abode. There will for the wrongdoers be no one to help. They do blaspheme who say: God is one of three in a trinity: for there is no god except One God. If they desist not from their word (of blasphemy), verily a grievous penalty will befall the blasphemers among them.’ (5:72-73. Translation of Yusuf Ali). According to most Muslims, therefore, Christians are guilty of *shirk*, of associating a created being, Jesus, with God the Creator.

I believe that one of the best ways of helping Muslims to understand our beliefs about Jesus is through the faith journey of the first disciples. They were orthodox Jews who believed passionately in the oneness of God. Daily they would recite the Shema: ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord ...’ (Deut 6:4). When they first followed Jesus they saw him simply as a rabbi, a religious teacher. But then they saw him doing things that only God can do – healing the sick, turning water into wine and raising the dead. They heard him claiming that he could do things that only God can do – like forgive sins and judge humankind on the Day of Judgment. So they must have wondered ‘How can this man Jesus be related to Yahweh, Almighty God?’ It was a gradual process by which they came to believe that Jesus was more than a rabbi, more than a prophet - that he had in some sense come from God. On the Day of Pentecost they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Their understanding of the relationship between God the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit developed gradually through their own experience. And after the resurrection and ascension they began to worship Jesus in the same way as they worshiped God. *But they never gave up their belief in the oneness of God.* They understood that it was a more complex kind of oneness in which there was a relationship of love between the Father, the Son and the Spirit.

There is also a more philosophical argument that we can use with Muslims. The Apostle John wrote, ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8), and Christians believe that God is love in his very nature. If Muslims insist that God is one in a strictly mathematical sense, how can they speak of love within God before the creation of the world? If we speak of love, there must be a subject and an object – someone who loves and someone or something that is loved; otherwise the word ‘love’ can have no meaning. If, before the creation of the universe, God was one in the way that Muslims understand his oneness, who or what could God love? There cannot have been any object for his love – a person or a thing for him to love. Muslims say, ‘God is merciful and compassionate.’ But if they do not believe in a trinitarian God, how can they say, ‘God is love’?

### **3. WE CAN HAVE ASSURANCE OF PEACE WTH GOD**

Three weeks ago I was in Bethlehem and visited the mosque less than five minutes walk from the Bible College where I was teaching. On the wall of the mosque there is a prayer in Arabic: ‘*waqina ‘adhab ni-nar*, Save us from the punishment of the Fire, of Hell.’

The leaflet about the beliefs of Islam says: ‘The Muslim must work to establish the laws of Allah in all areas of his life, in order to gain his pleasure ... A person who obeys and worships Allah will be rewarded with a place of happiness in Paradise ...’

I asked myself in the mosque if I could ever want to pray that prayer, and immediately thought of Paul’s words in Romans 5: ‘Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God ...’ (Rom 5:1-2).

I recognise that this idea of assurance of salvation is probably a rather Protestant conviction, and that Christians of Catholic and Orthodox tradition do not generally speak with the same confidence. Isn’t it presumption, they might say, to believe that we can be sure of salvation? But this conviction is based on many New Testament texts like John’s summary of why he wrote his gospel: ‘These signs are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing

you may have life in his name.’ (John 20:30-31). And his reason for writing his first epistle: ‘I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life’ (1 John 5:13).

Last year I was speaking to a meeting of Muslims and Christians in a restaurant in a small town in rural Suffolk. The imam and I were both asked to speak about how we understood worship and prayer in our faith. In my short presentation I made the point that Christians nearly always sing in acts of worship. We really do believe that we have something to be joyful about. We enjoy the music and the words because together they express our response to who God is and what he has done for us. In a few weeks’ time we will be singing Easter hymns in worship of the risen Christ. It’s what God has done for us in Christ’s death and resurrection that enables us to believe that the judgement is already past, and we can be confident that we have been reconciled to God and can approach him with confidence as a loving Father.

#### **4. WE DO MUCH HEART-SEARCHING ABOUT CHRISTIAN HISTORY AND RECENT WORLD HISTORY**

Let me here simply list some of the things that we reflect on as we think of our Christian history:

- We wonder about the conversion of Constantine and his creation of a Christian empire. Was it a triumph of the cross, or, as some would argue, one of greatest disasters in Christian history?
- How have we accepted so many situations in which church and state were so closely linked – as in Byzantium and the Holy Roman Empire?
- How could we send Crusaders to win back the Holy Land with the sign of the cross on their chests and to slaughter Jews, Muslims and Christians when they captured Jerusalem in 1097?
- How could we tolerate and practise slavery for so many centuries?
- What are we to think about the way Christian mission went hand in hand with European colonialism?
- How could Christians in South Africa defend apartheid by appealing to the Bible?
- How could we be so blind for so long about gender issues?

As I’ve already explained, many of us have a very guilty conscience about the role of western powers – especially Britain and France – in carving up the Middle East between them at the end of the first World War. This, for example is how Sir Edward Grey, who had been the British Foreign Secretary from 1905 to 1916, admitted the inconsistency between the promises made to the Jews and Arabs in a speech in parliament in 1923:

‘I think it will be very much better that ... we should state frankly that, in the urgency of the war, engagements were entered into which were not entirely consistent with each other ... I think that we are placed in considerable difficulty by the Balfour Declaration ... It promised a Zionist home without prejudice to the civil and religious rights of the population of Palestine. A Zionist home ... undoubtedly means or implies a Zionist government over the district in which the home is placed, and if ninety-three per cent of the population of Palestine are Arabs, I do not see how you can establish other than an Arab government, without prejudice to their civil rights. That one sentence alone of the Balfour Declaration seems to me to involve, without overstating the case, very great difficulty of fulfilment.’

In all this heart-searching we are admitting with the Psalmist ‘We and our fathers have sinned’ (Psalm 106:6). We’re saying to our Muslim friends that when we measure Christian history against the standard of the life and teaching of Jesus, we recognise with shame the many ways in which we have fallen short. And if we are open and honest with our Muslim friends, we might have the right to ask them whether they are prepared to be as open and honest about their history. Can they, for example, justify all the Islamic conquests on the first century of Islam in terms of defensive Jihad? Are they happy with the way slavery was enshrined in Islamic law for centuries? If they accuse the West of imperialism, do they admit that they too have been imperialists and have had their own empires in which Muslims were ruling over Christians and others?

## **5. THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL TO TRANSFORM INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES**

I feel I want to say to my Muslim friends, ‘Your diagnosis of the human condition is too optimistic and too superficial. You say that our basic problem is that we are ignorant of God’s requirements, forgetful and weak. You say that God’s provision for the human condition is simply *shari’a* law to show us how we should live, the example of the Prophet, and the Islamic community to keep us on the Straight Path. We would say that the problem goes much deeper, and that because of what we call the Fall, there is something fundamentally wrong with human nature that needs to be transformed.’

This, for example, is how the letter to Titus sums up the transforming power of the gospel: ‘The grace of God has dawned upon the world with healing/salvation for all mankind; and by it we are disciplined to renounce godless ways and worldly desires, and to live a life of temperance, honesty, and godliness in the present age, looking forward to the happy fulfilment of our hope when the splendour of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ will appear. He it is who sacrificed himself for us, to set us free from all wickedness and to make us his own people, pure and eager to do good’ (Titus 2:11-14).

So, while we are aware of things in our past which make us ashamed, we believe we can also point to many situations in history where we believe that the Christian message has not only transformed the lives of individuals, but has also transformed societies:

- The early church must have made a real difference to the position of women in society.
- The Protestant Reformation played an important role in the creation of the kind of civil society that we have in Europe today. In recent years Christian leaders have tried hard to encourage political leaders in the EU to recognise the contribution of Christianity to the history of Europe.
- Methodism in England had a profound effect on the lives of working people and civil society, and promoted values of honesty and integrity in the business world.
- I think of an organisation called Musalaha (the Hebrew and the Arabic word for reconciliation) which brings Jews, Muslims and Christians together in Israel/Palestine, working together at grass-roots level to bring people together to reflect on how they can live together and work for the common good.

So we believe that it’s not law, it’s not preaching or moral teaching that can change individuals and societies. It’s what God has done for us in Jesus and the Holy Spirit that changes us from the inside and changes the way we live in society.

## **CONCLUSION**

By way of conclusion, let me say that I wonder who it was on Birthe's committee who suggested this topic. I wonder what kind of answer he/she was expecting. Has he/she been surprised or shocked at the particular points I have chosen to emphasise? I look forward to hearing from some of you what you wish Christians knew about Muslims and Islam and what Muslims knew about Christians and Christianity.