

# INTERRELIGIOUS Insight

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## The Changing Perception of Islam

Christian theology and theologians

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In this essay I shall examine some of the major issues for Christians in relation to Islamic beliefs and practices. The key themes of Islamic monotheism, Prophet Muhammad, the Qur'an, and interreligious dialogue will be apparent and I shall also make reference to significant Christian theologians.

### ISLAM AS A THEOLOGICAL CONCERN

I begin with the sympathetic outlook of the Catholic theologian **Hans Küng** (1928 - ) as one who takes Islam and Muslim thought very seriously. He is aware that any Christian understanding of Islam will always be against the background of past encounters and contemporary relations between Islam and the West. As he states: "Let us admit the fact: Islam continues to strike us as essentially foreign, as more threatening, politically and economically, than either Hinduism or Buddhism, a phenomenon, in any case, that we have a hard time understanding." Then he emphasises that "this is precisely the task of ecumenical Christian theology: to face the challenge of Islam and work for mutual understanding."<sup>1</sup>

Küng locates Islam within a wider Christian theological perspective. He approaches the nature of the Prophet Muhammad and places him in a theological space akin to the Old Testament in the traditional Christian outlook. Küng situates him geographically in Arabia, and theologically where the tribes of Arabia encountered Judaism and Christianity. These are the sources for the idea of God and forms of piety in Islam. While Küng's assessment of the Prophet is not free of anthropological judgement, he does clearly hold that to say "the Prophet lacked originality ... is a serious misunderstanding".<sup>2</sup> But is this originality due to what he received from God, as the Muslims believe, or because of some ambition for authority and power? That question is left unexplored in Küng's work. He is, however, keen to place the Prophet alongside the Hebrew prophets. He provides seven parallels, which it is instructive to recall fully as this is perhaps the first time, in modern Christian theological assessment, that the Prophet Muhammad has featured so prominently.

1. Like the *prophets of Israel*, Muhammad based his work not on any office given him by the community (or its authorities) but on a special, personal relationship with God.
2. Like the prophets of Israel, Muhammad was a strong-willed character, who saw himself as wholly penetrated by his divine vocation, totally taken up by God's claim on him, exclusively absorbed by his mission.
3. Like the prophets of Israel, Muhammad spoke out amid a religious and social crisis. With his passionate piety and his revolutionary preaching, he stood up against the wealthy ruling class and the tradition of which it was the guardian.
4. Like the prophets of Israel, Muhammad, who usually calls himself a "warner," wished to be nothing but God's mouthpiece and to proclaim God's word, not his own.
5. Like the prophets of Israel, Muhammad tirelessly glorified the one God, who tolerates no other gods before him and who is, at the same time, the kindly Creator and merciful Judge.
6. Like the prophets of Israel, Muhammad insisted upon unconditional obedience, devotion, and "submission" (the literal meaning of "Islam") to this one God. He called for every kind of gratitude toward God and of generosity toward human beings.
7. Like the prophets of Israel, Muhammad linked his monotheism to a humanism, connecting faith in the one God and his judgement to the demand for social justice: judgement and redemption, threats against the unjust, who go to hell, and promises to the just, who are gathered into God's Paradise.<sup>3</sup>

From these seven parallels, and in the context of Muslims living by the faith given through Muhammad, Küng concludes that for "the men and women of Arabia and, in the end, far beyond, Muhammad truly was and is *the* religious reformer, law giver, and leader: *the* prophet, pure and simple."<sup>4</sup> Strictly speaking, however, the nature of prophethood in Islam and the account of the prophets in the Old Testament are incompatible. First, prophets are often shown in the latter as fallible and weak in moral character. Secondly, the Prophet is a messenger for the whole of humanity, and to attach his mission and ministry exclusively to "the men and women of Arabia" is contrary to the Muslim view.

In assessing Küng's contribution to the debate on the Prophet's rehabilitation to a Christian theological understanding of Islam, Muslims will appreciate his strong and bold steps, but will remain sceptical insofar as he does not go far enough.

A further difficulty is Küng's assessment of the Qur'an. He states: "there was no Arabic translation of the Bible in existence; if there had been, the passages in the Qur'an relating to the Bible would have been clearer, more precise and less fragmentary."<sup>5</sup> What is implied here is human authorship of the Qur'an. Küng goes on at great length to explain borrowings from the Judeo-Christian traditions. He urges both Muslims and Christians to continue discussion on this issue, reminding Muslims that what Christians have gone through (textual criticism and deconstruction), they too will have to experience and come to terms with. The assumption is that the Islamic world has much catching up to do with the Western world, and in the process will follow the same pattern as their Christian and Jewish counterparts. In particular, he hopes that the "historiocritical study of the holy book will eventually be allowed to become a reality."<sup>6</sup> Following that, Küng perhaps expects that a "reformed Islam" will emerge, able not only to deal with the strongly orthodox temperament of Muslims, but also to countenance compromise with the doctrine of an Enlightened Christianity. That in turn is the basis of Küng's hopes for a "global ethics".

## ISLAM AS A MISSIONARY CONCERN

The Cairo Conference of 1906 set the tone and temper for the evangelism of Muslims. Its reports and literature identified a clear unifying purpose: the opportunity that awaited for conversion from Islam to Christianity. The approach that followed was a twin track policy: firstly, preparation of the

necessary manpower to achieve the objective of mission; and secondly, the westernization or secularisation of Muslim society through education and relief programmes. **Duncan Macdonald** (1863 –1943) was convinced that Christians who hope “to enter into relations with Muslims should know how Muslims think and feel about Muhammad...”<sup>7</sup> But in the thought of Macdonald, the Prophet was a traumatised and unsettled personality, the product of social conditions and psychological anxiety. **Hendrik Kramer** (1888 - 1965) saw Islam as “a superficial religion that has almost no questions and no answers”, and is therefore incapable of dealing with human problems. He attributed the Muslims’ strong resistance to conversion, which he experienced during his stay in Indonesia, to a mind-set fixed particularly by the Qur’an, in “an enormous amount of stubborn, ingenuine, theological thinking”.<sup>8</sup>

**Samuel Zwemer** (1876 – 1952) of the Reformed Church in America adopted an anthropological approach in order to reach Muslim society. He studied Islamic faith in order to know the Muslim people who needed to be rescued from the curse of Islam. He referred to Muslims as “the millions still under the yoke of the false prophet”.<sup>9</sup> He condemned in the strongest terms anything that did not fit the Christian description of faith, truth and revelation. He was also keen to describe Islam within a popular Arab cultural context, one that had “influenced” the shape of Islam. He looked down from an imperialistic height upon the Islamic world and saw “unoccupied field”. He exhorted the participants at the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 that, for the followers of Christ, “there should not be unoccupied fields”. The economic situation, the subjugation of Muslim intellectual life, the imbalance of political power, contributed to his writing *The Disintegration of Islam* (1915). This inevitable disintegration would be, in his view, “a divine preparation” for the evangelisation of Muslim lands.

The different voice of **Kenneth Cragg** (1913 - ) holds that what Islam is, is “what Muslims hold it to be”. After Zwemer, Cragg eloquent interpretation is like a breath of fresh air. Core to his interpretive effort is the notion of *retrieval*. He means by it to enable Christians and Muslims to rise above historic misunderstandings between the two faiths and make sense of Christian beliefs, applying (“retrieving”) Qur’anic and Islamic ideas to provide Islamic reasons for being Christian. As far as Islamic “documents” are concerned, he argues, there are “positive implications for the faith of the Christian within Islamic theology” and they “are significant and must, at all costs, be imaginatively and loyally retrieved”.<sup>10</sup> Cragg remains imaginative in his exploration of Islam whilst retaining his loyalty to his Christian faith and mission.

A number of certain recurring themes in Cragg’s approach lead us to suggest that he moved forward in his exploration of Islam, but remained deeply rooted within Western historical scholarship. He suggests that the Prophet’s mind is a product of two elements - firstly, the inner struggle that kept him away from the city of Makkah and led him frequently to visit the cave of Hira where he meditated on his orphaned upbringing, his wondering reflections on nature and procreation and the prevailing injustices that he so helplessly observed; and second, his awareness of Makkah’s prosperity and the prestige and power it brought to the Makkans, and the centrality of the Kabah that attracted so many pilgrims each year. These two elements gave rise to Rasuliyah (the messengership). While the first led him in a mystical and spiritual direction, the second found an urge and “yearning for a source of unity” for the Arabs and the “idea and the ideal of Scripture, and of being Scriptuarist”.<sup>11</sup> Cragg links the event of Hijrah to the concept of Jihad and questions the nature of the Prophet’s motivation: “Where Islam is potentially universalized in *Hijrah* it is inherently politicized in *Jihad*. The move *out* of Mecca *with* the faith presages the move *against* Mecca *for* the faith. In that transition, not only is the *Hijrah* implemented in its prospective relevance, but Islam is defined in its essential character.” And he asks: “what is the relevance of power to truth?”<sup>12</sup> The separation of Madinah from Makkah remains for Cragg the “extraneous material” which he wishes Muslims to address.

## Islam a mystical concern

The central figure in this effort of relationship and appraisal is undoubtedly **Louis Massignon** (1883 -1962) who viewed Islam as a *challenge*. It was the Christians' duty to meet this challenge by placing themselves at the very centre of Muslim beliefs. The Prophet appealed to Massignon as one who yearned to be in a God-centred world where Jews and Christians are part of a wider family. This attitude to Islam's central personality was a bold and visionary one. Massignon defended the Prophet from the charge of being a false prophet while maintaining the safe Christian distance that sees prophethood in Islam as lacking the intercessory function. Instead of "false" and "true", Massignon preferred the terms "positive" and "negative" to distinguish "two attributes of authentic prophecy". One "challenges and reverses the human values", and with the other the Prophet bears witness to the "final separation of the good from evil". He saw the Prophet's involvement in political reconciliation as an "entire politics [which] succinctly reflected his contrasting the concrete problem to be resolved with that which his faith dictated to his heart".<sup>13</sup> Massignon strongly believed that the Holy Spirit is at work and would bring Islam closer towards the Christian faith. His strong sense of Christian responsibility is demonstrated in his concept of a *badliya* (substitution) movement. He was instrumental in inspiring groups of Christians to take the sins of Muslim souls on themselves. He believed that, by doing so, they were offering their lives to God for their fellow Muslims who could then attain salvation in union with Christ. Such a radical departure that contradicted the prevailing attitude of proselytising Muslims was bound to face opposition. But largely this sympathetic approach to Muslims generated a great deal of respect for Massignon.

## ISLAM AS AN ECUMENICAL CONCERN

The World Council of Churches is largely a Council of Protestant Churches but includes Eastern Orthodox Churches in its membership. The debates about relations with other faiths generated various discourses in the early phase of the WCC's work. The contributions of Stanley J. Samartha from India and George Khodr from Lebanon – both with direct experience of living in pluralistic societies – provided practical experience in the forming of the WCC's guidelines for relations with other faiths. Khodr argued that Christ is not exclusively bound to the Church but is rather to be found outside the Church; nor is the saving work of the Holy Spirit confined to the Church alone. Samartha argued that the biblical understanding of truth is not "propositional but relational, and is to be sought, not in the isolation of lonely meditation, but in the living, personal confrontation between God and man, and man and man."<sup>14</sup> This common concern for humanity and relations based upon humanitarian concerns provided a much needed space where Islam and Christianity could engage in something like equality and openness. More recently the WCC has moved its emphasis to contemporary relations between the two communities against the background of political events and movements – the fall of the Soviet Union, the Gulf War, religious/political terrorism, the growing demand for cultural (as well as political and economic) independence expressed as a demand for a return to tradition and shar'iah.

## ISLAM AS HISTORICAL AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL CONCERN

Although **Montgomery Watt** (1909- ) adopts a "scientific" approach, his work is also intended to enable theological judgement on the Prophet. He construes the Prophet's religious ideas as a projection of socio-economic aspirations, ignoring any function for revelation and connection with God. In his later writings Watt moved more explicitly to theological concerns. Writing in 1984, he described Muhammad as "a genuine prophet in the sense that God used him to communicate truth about himself to human beings..." Four years later, on the opening page of *Muhammad's Mecca: History in the Qur'an* he stated his personal opinion:

I am convinced that Muhammad was sincere in believing that what came to him as revelation (*wahy*) was not the product of conscious thought on his part. I consider Muhammad was truly a prophet, and think that we Christians should admit this on the basis of the Christian principle that ‘by their fruits you will know them’, since through the centuries Islam has produced many upright and saintly people. If he is a prophet too, then in accordance with the Christian doctrine that the Holy Spirit spoke by the prophets, the Qur’an may be accepted as of divine origin.<sup>15</sup>

**Wilfred Cantwell Smith** (1916 – 2000) draws attention to the change in attitude, particularly in the Western world, to revelation and scripture. He invites Christians, Western Christian in particular, to understand how Muslims see the centrality of their Scripture. He says:

Muslims do not read the Qur’an and conclude that it is divine, rather, they believe that it is divine, and they then they read it. This makes a great deal of difference, and I urge upon Christians or secular students of the Qur’an that if they wish to understand it as a religious document, they must approach it in this spirit.<sup>16</sup>

Smith is cautious in his approach to the Prophet: “The personality of Muhammad is essentially irrelevant”, he argues, because to “accept that he is a prophet is to accept the Qur’an as binding...”<sup>17</sup> In Smith’s account, the Prophet’s inspiration came from outside the Arab cultured milieu, beginning with a firm conviction that Judaism and Christianity needed reform but ending up giving the Arabs a monotheistic faith. Smith remarks that “the Islamic seems to be the only religious movement in the world that arose historically not primarily out of a reform of the indigenous religious tradition of the people to whom it was presented.” And “the Prophet’s message was delivered to the Arabs as reformulation not primarily of their own, idolatrous, religious tradition but of the tradition of Christians and Jews...”<sup>18</sup>

## NEW THEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO ISLAM

The increasing interaction between Muslims and Christians in Europe, in South and South-east Asia and in Africa, is inspiring Christian theologians to look at Islam in a post-colonial, pluralist setting. The Christian theologians John Macquarrie, Maurice Wiles, John Hick and Keith Ward are addressing such challenges.<sup>19</sup> Here I mention, very briefly, the approach of Keith Ward as an example of this new theology. Ward proposes an “open theology” to engage with other faiths. He suggests that there “are forms of revelation one’s own tradition does not express”. He sees Islam as a “unique witness to the nature and purpose of God”. He emphasises (as Cantwell Smith and others did) that each tradition needs to be seen within its own context, and its formulation and expression of faith should be affirmed. Christian theology has travelled some distance from earlier dismissive attitudes towards Islam, but it needs to, and can, come closer still to other faiths. Ward strives to bring Christianity to a “common position” in line with other faiths, and not necessarily to set up “a common structure” for the different faiths. The “common position” assumes a general connectedness with others.<sup>20</sup> He is cautious against unnecessary dispute with others’ perception of their faith, at ease with a “lowest common denominator” approach provided it carries one to the higher goal of connectedness.

Ward places Islam within the Judaic tradition. “Islam universalizes Judaism”, he argues, but because “there is very little interest in God’s self-revelation”, Islam is at odds with Christianity. Regarding the Qur’an, he suggests it could be a “Divinely inspired” book, similar to the idea of an inspired *theopneustos*, “breathed out by God” as applied to the Hebrew Bible. The “breathed out by God” creates the human absence in the Hebrew Scripture and in the Qur’an. If the former is acceptable as a divinely inspired work, why he asks, can the Qur’an not be called a divinely inspired?

## CONCLUSION

Christians – theologians and missiologists – make their own history, that is, they shape their own thought, both deliberately and without conscious intention, in response to the environment and the challenges they face. The last hundred years of theological development, that we have surveyed show many conflicting responses to Islam and Muslims. Each response, in the end, reflects the past but also appeals to a specific model of how Christians want to relate, and of what there is (in the other) to relate to. In the process each response encountered, in part or in passing, the themes listed at the beginning of this essay.

*The understanding of God:* Theologians such as Küng and Ward, and also a growing generation of missiologists, are recognizing the fact that the Islamic concept of God is not something other than their own. However, the old perception of Allah as a Muslim deity is still expressed by polemicists. Perhaps the difficulty arises when the nature of God in Christianity and Islam is compared. The Muslims' God is transcendent, whose care for his creatures is mediated through Revelations and the promise of mercy and justice. The Christians' God is revealed as human and suffering for humanity.

*The Prophet Muhammad:* Muslim belief about the Prophet Muhammad and the Christian understanding his Prophethood will remain a contentious issue. Christian understanding of the role of prophets, (in Cragg, for example), is shaped by the Old Testament, and expects Muslims to “reconsider” and “rethink”. While that difficult issue is unresolved there is certainly a growing Christian realisation that they have to see the Prophet of Islam in a new and more positive light.<sup>21</sup>

*Scripture and secular-historical scholarship:* Almost all theologians or missiologists look forward to a self-critical assessment of the Qur'an and Islamic Revelation generally, though for different reasons. One reason is the desire to see Islam emerge from its “medieval closet” and discover attitudes such that the modern world would be comfortable with them and they with it. In this respect, Muslim aspirations for life under the shari'ah are seen as regressive. Of course, Muslims have the mechanism of ijihad to enable adoption to changed or new circumstances, and they are using it. However, pressures, the share pace of change in the contemporary world, the aggressiveness of contemporary culture and its extraordinary invasiveness, alongside political and economic realities too brutally obvious to mention, make it very difficult to countenance and effect change while maintaining a loyal and dignified relationship with tradition.

*The role of dialogue:* Dialogue between the two faith communities has, so far, largely focused on social, communal and general religious issues. Difficult theological issues have been postponed for the sake of good manners. Plainly, dialogue must generate enough mutual respect and trust before it can risk trespassing the boundaries of sensitivity. However, the two communities must at some stage confront these issues in a sincere and serious manner if a positive tolerance is to be realised between Christians and Muslims. In the light of the historical legacy and the socio-political realities the present time, it may seem already difficult enough to achieve non-conflict, a sort of well-meaning indifference.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hans Kung, *Christianity and World Religions*, London: Collins, 1987, p. 19.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 25-26.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Duncan Black Macdonald, *Aspects of Islam*, New York: Macmillan, 1911, p. 89f.

<sup>8</sup> Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. London: The Edinburgh House Press, 1938, pp. 216-7.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Zwemer, *The Moslem World, Young People's Missionary Movement of the United States and Canada*, 1908, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Lamb, "Kenneth Cragg's Understanding of Christian Mission to Islam", in David Thomas & Clare Amos, eds., *A Faithful Presence: Essays for Kenneth Cragg*, London: Melsende, 2003, p. 130.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Cragg, *The House of Islam*, Belmont, CA: Dickenson Publishing Co., 1969, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>13</sup> David Kerr, "'He Walked in the Path of the Prophets' Toward Christian Theological Recognition of the Prophethood of Muhammad", in Haddad, Y.Y. and Haddad, W.Z. (Eds.) *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, Gainesville: University of Florida, p. 429.

<sup>14</sup> Stanley J. Samartha (Ed.), *Living Faiths and the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1971, p. 154. See also George Khodr, "Christianity in a Pluralist World – the Economy of the Holy Spirit", pp. 131 – 142.

<sup>15</sup> Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad's Mecca: History in the Qur'an*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Cantwell Smith, *Questions of Religious Truth*, London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1967 p. 49.

<sup>17</sup> Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History*, New York: The New American Library, 1957, p. 27, fn. 18.

<sup>18</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, New York: The New American Library, 1964, p. 98, p. 99.

<sup>19</sup> See John Macquarrie, *The Mediators: Nine Stars in the Human Sky*, London: SCM Press, 1995; Maurice Wiles, *Christian Theology and Inter-religious Dialogue*, London: SCM Press, 1992; John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, London: SCM Press, 1993. See also Hick's views on Islam in Adnan Aslan, *Religious Pluralism in Christian and Islamic Philosophy: the Thought of John Hick and Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, London: Curzon Press, 1998.

<sup>20</sup> Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, p. 337.

<sup>21</sup> Short biographies of Muhammad by Martin Forward (*Muhammad: A Short Biography*, Oxford: One World Publications, 1997) and by Karen Armstrong (*Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*, London: Victor Gollancz Ltd. 1991) are indicative of this new direction.