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A Christian understanding of Islam.

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I value the opportunity to share my thoughts on a Christian understanding of Islam.

“CROSSING OVER.”

I received the request that I speak on this important topic as an invitation to “cross over” from the safety of the Christian world that I know so well and to enter the world of Islam, there to be challenged, questioned and to receive new wisdom or at least to gain new insights into wisdom I have received from within the Christian perspective on life. The process of “crossing over” has become an important understanding of inter-faith dialogue when taken seriously and with a desire to deepen our understanding of life and of God. To “cross over” means to leave the safety of what one has received and takes for granted and to enter, as far as one can, into the perspectives, experience and wisdom of another person or group. We try to “feel” the other’s way, as far as we can, from within rather than observing it in the manner of a dispassionate scholar. The process of “crossing over” is not completed till we have returned to our own home again, carrying with us new questions, new perspectives, and fresh interpretations of truth we had thought we knew already. Crossing over is a gentle, imaginative and deeply spiritual activity. Whether we are passing over from one culture to another or from one religion to another, it is a way of knowing that is a doorway into a world shaped by peace, understanding and shared commitment to the well being of the human family. The goal of “crossing over” is not to judge but to understand, not to argue but to receive, not to conquer but to appreciate. It does not require that we agree with everything we learn from our neighbour but it does require that we listen, try to understand, try to “feel” their way of living and believing and are ready to be questioned by what we find.

In “crossing over” into Islam in search of understanding I am not entering alien territory. Islam and Christianity are two significant responses to the call of God to share in the healing of the world. They are both invitations to cooperate with God in the creation of a world community marked by peace, justice, generosity and hospitality. Dialogue between our two faiths is a conversation between first cousins who sadly have been separated by history, culture, geography and political expediency. We stand together, in a post 9/11 world, like family members seeking reconciliation and understanding sufficient to enable us to share together in God’s healing of a needy world. Not everyone would agree with this understanding. There are many Christians and Muslims who are happy to perpetuate and even deepen inherited antagonisms. I simply believe they are wrong and act contrary to the purposes of God.

There are some serious limitations to my exploration of Islam. My understanding of Islam is incomplete. I am a Christian, by upbringing, by education and by conviction. I live outside the circle of Muslim belief and practice. I have learned a great deal from friends and through the reading of many helpful books but without years of immersion in the study of the Qur’an, the mastery of Arabic and participation in the spiritual life of Islam I must remain a sympathetic and appreciative spectator. This is a problem we all face in inter-faith dialogue. It is not easy for any of us to “feel” from within the religious perspectives through which another’s life is given meaning. Faith is a way of life, an experience of life that touches every part of one’s being, before it is organised as a set of beliefs that can be learned from a text- book. “Crossing over” is an adventure of mind and heart.

My journey into Islam is my journey. I cannot speak for all Christians. There are, a great variety of views held by Christian churches and groups about Islam, ranging from outright rejection to critical appreciation. I find myself in a group who regard Islam as a doorway into the heart of God. I know that culture, history, geography and doctrinal disputes have created many expressions of Islam. The expression of Islam I seek to understand from within is a moderate, mainstream, expression of Islamic practice and belief. It's the pathway of those who through friendship and shared adventures have been my teachers. I only hope that the Islam of which I speak and with which I engage is recognisable to you.

CHANGING VIEWS OF ISLAM AMONG CHRISTIANS.

In "crossing over" I carry with me an evolving Christian understanding of Islam. While in local communities there have always been Jews, Christians and Muslims who have maintained friendship in the presence of difference, official church teaching, until recently, has reflected a negative, even hostile assessment of Islam. Intolerance of those who are different is like a virus in the human bloodstream and Christians are well infected by this dangerous illness. The contribution of Islam to civilised humanity through science, mathematics, architecture, medicine and philosophy has not always been acknowledged as a gift from Islam. The contribution of the Prophet has been ignored as of no account or even described as a destructive episode in human history. A growing number of thoughtful Christians seek a more informed, balanced and appreciative understanding but, sadly, old caricatures still persist in many quarters and are well represented in the Western media. In informed Christian circles today the greatness of Muhammad as a prophet of devotion to God and to the welfare of the human community is widely recognised. Christian scholars applaud his greatness in bringing a sense of the oneness of God to the Arab world and in providing for them a deepening sensitivity to the possibility of peace and justice within the human family.

WE SHARE A GREAT DEAL

In passing over into Islam I find a great deal that is familiar to me as a Christian. Along with the Jewish community we belong to the family of Abraham through whom God sought, and still seeks, to bring blessing to humanity. Abraham is important in all three communities as a model of life lived in response to God's invitation to follow the life-giving path of blessing rather than destructive pathways leading to human division, exploitation and violence.

The reality of God, active in human history and throughout creation, is at the heart of Muslim and Christian believing. We know ourselves to be ultimately responsible to God for the conduct of our lives rather than to the passing systems and fashions of our day. We each pray, knowing our lives to be touched by grace. We seek to follow the straight path through life that leads to human fulfilment and communal harmony. We value the gifts of family and friends as gifts of God. There is more than enough that we share for us to hold hands and work together as fellow pilgrims on the journey of life.

YET WE ALSO DIFFER

In "crossing over" I am also aware we differ in important respects and that even when we use the same words the meanings may differ. The danger of misunderstanding is ever present. It is foolish to ignore or explain away genuine differences. Recognition of similarity and difference are first steps on the road to mutual understanding and respect. We need each other and each other's wisdom because we differ and yet belong to the same family. Friendship and appreciation does not require agreement on all matters. Friendship embraces difference within the context of a larger belonging.

Both faiths use the word God but operate with different mental pictures of God. We each have a holy book, Qur'an and Bible, but we read our books in different ways and our methods of interpretation differ. We each have a founding figure, Muhammad and Jesus, but they play different roles in our understanding of life and of faith. We each believe we are called to live a moral life and that moral norms and laws should undergird the life of our nation but we differ over specific moral issues. We agree there is a link between political life and religion but the way this link is to be expressed differs between Islamic and Christian-origin nations. While celebrating all that we share and hold in common I find myself also recognising and even celebrating our differences. In naming our differences we also name the places where we may learn from one another. Our differences are within the circle of shared faith in God.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

In "crossing over" I have learned to appreciate many of the spiritual disciplines and outward forms of Islam as doorways into the experience of God. In some cases they serve as reminders of spiritual disciplines largely lost by a church increasingly shaped by the secular world. There is much for Christians to learn from Islam in this regard.

The discipline of Salat (prayer) is a reminder to Christians of the decline of regular prayer among Christians and of the ancient discipline that the Lord's Prayer (a prayer of Jesus for the coming of God's rule in all of life) should be said slowly and thoughtfully at least three times every day.

The Hajj (the annual pilgrimage to Mecca), as an opportunity for spiritual renewal and reaffirmation of identity given by God, is a reminder to Christians of the ancient Christian tradition of pilgrimage, a practice not widely practiced in our day. It is on pilgrimage, when the tasks of everyday life are left behind, that we are able to enter more deeply into the life of God and recognise ourselves as children of God.

The time of Ramadan reminds Christians of the ancient disciplines of spiritual fasting, communal celebration and giving to the needy. The Christian season of Lent, the forty days before Easter are a rough equivalent but a church grown too busy has largely lost the sense of spiritual renewal, discipline and meditation that once shaped Lent. Ramadan serves as a reminder of how we Christians have mislaid some of the greatest of our spiritual treasures.

When I hear the Qur'an recited, though I hear without understanding, my inner spirit senses an invitation to be quiet before the mystery of God and the wonder of creation.

The act of facing towards Mecca during prayer is a powerful symbol; of the essential unity, not only of Islam but of a world bound together within a shared dream of what could be.

Three important areas of belief demonstrate how we share yet differ in our central convictions. They represent questions that a Christian seeking to understand Islam must address. In "crossing over", the mystery of God, the figure of Jesus and our reading of our holy books, cry out to be addressed as points of convergence and of difference.

THE MYSTERY OF GOD.

As I have explored Islam I have grown in my respect for the unyielding focus on the oneness of God. In replacing the many deities of 7th century Arabian life with devotion to Allah, the compassionate and merciful, Muhammad gifted to humanity and to his people a standard of spiritual truth and of social cohesion that is a gift to us all. We live in an age when many gods compete for our loyalty – the god of affluence woos us with the seductive offer of comfort bought at the price of our neighbour's poverty, the god of patriotism and of national power beckons with

an offer of economic strength bought by the blood of young lives, the gods of popularity and unbridled ambition serve only as masks to hide our personal insecurity and emotional fragility. Christianity and Islam share in the affirmation that God alone is worthy of ultimate human commitment and undivided loyalty.

The deepest thing we share is that in an increasingly secular western world we are among those who speak of God and of the divine presence in every aspect of our living. We do not always have the words to explain fully what we mean by “God” but we know that our lives are touched by mercy, judgement and possibility that come from beyond what we can see and touch and weigh. God is the mystery within which we live. We know that we dwell within the loving purpose of God and we pray that we may serve those purposes using gifts God has placed within our lives. We both use a variety of words and metaphors to describe God, knowing that no single word or human analogy can fully penetrate into the mystery of God’s being. Within Islam we speak of the ninety- nine names of God while Christians uses the rich storehouse of names for God found within the Hebrew Bible and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity to express the mystery of God present within the human community and throughout creation.

Along with our Jewish cousins we are monotheists. God is one and though humans may create gods of their own choosing yet, for us, God alone is God and worthy of our ultimate allegiance. We cannot give our total allegiance to any political, cultural or even religious system that seeks our uncritical commitment. God alone has the right to claim our deepest self. As monotheists we believe life to be a unity and that our lives are fulfilled and our communities healed as we serve God’s loving purposes. It means we are a strange people living as we do in a society that is ever ready to give its ultimate allegiance to this or that political option or to passing economic theories or political or military adventures. We will have opinions about all these things but finally, if we are true to the depths of our faith, our ultimate allegiance is to God alone. Beyond all the similarities between Islam and Christianity this I suggest is what we share at the deepest level of life. We believe in God and seek above all else to have our lives shaped by Divine love. The deepest levels of inter- faith friendship are touched when we are able to share what it means in daily life to live as children of God and as servants of the Divine purposes. While Christians witness to the reality of God made known in Jesus, Muslims witness to the reality of God revealed in the Qur’an. We do not need to agree for we both acknowledge that the mystery of God is unable to be captured in our fragile human words.

THE TRINITY

I just mentioned the Trinity, the peculiarly Christian way of speaking of God’s presence in life. I need to say more for here we touch upon something that has been a point of division since the beginning. Within the Qur’an the Trinitarian understanding of God is specifically condemned as a departure from the oneness of God. Christians respond by saying that talk of the Trinity is an enrichment of our understanding of the one God. Christians find it difficult to describe their unique understanding of God outside of the worship and ongoing life of the Christian community but the inter-faith imperative requires us to share our insights as best we can with our cousins- in-faith.

The doctrine of the Trinity, that God is present among us as the Father who is creating, the Son who is healing the world and the Spirit who unites the human family is the Christian way of approaching and entering the mystery of God. God is the love that encompasses us and gives meaning to our lives and the life of the universe. The doctrine of the Trinity is a window through which Christians glimpse the love, energy and presence of God’s love.

The traditional statement of the doctrine of the Trinity, formulated in the 4th century in the language of Greek philosophy of that time, does not serve us well in the twenty first century but it points to understandings of God and of life that are at the heart of the Christian way. From the beginning it was open to misunderstanding and as a Christian reader of the Qur'an I sense the influence of continuing debate and disagreement in the Christian church of the seventh century as background to Qur'anic criticisms of the Trinity. In speaking of the Trinity Christians seek to hold together three affirmations about the mysterious and loving activity of God. As the Father God is the loving creator who invites humans to become co-creators of a world shaped by generosity, peace and justice. As the Son, God is understood to be present in the life, death and continuing presence of Jesus Christ. The description of Jesus as Son of God is to be understood metaphorically rather than literally. A literal understanding of the sonship of Jesus is clearly an absurdity. As servant of the purposes of God Jesus embodied God's intentions for humanity with such grace and consistency that those who shared his life sensed the fullness of God in him. When Christians ask how we should live they start with the non-violent, hospitable, generous and forgiving way of Jesus believing these qualities to be reflections, embodiments, of the nature of God. As the Spirit, God is present within every part of life and in the life of every person. It is by the Spirit that boundaries that divide us are broken down and through the influence of the Spirit working within our lives that we grow in love.

The Trinity enables Christians to speak of God as present in all of life, as dynamic and creative energy, building us up in love, forgiving our sins and drawing the human family towards the fulfilment of creation. There may be other ways of speaking of God that preserve the Christian emphasis on the centrality of love in our understanding of God but within the Christian community it is felt that something is lost when God is understood as less than Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I would say to Islamic cousins, the Trinity might puzzle you, but I would hope that you might accept that this way of thinking and praying is for Christians a doorway into the heart of God.

JESUS

It is a surprise to many Christians when they learn that Jesus Christ is honoured in the Qur'an and within the Muslim family. The Islamic denial of the Divinity of Jesus reflects views held by some Christian groups at the time of Muhammad who disagreed with the dominant Christian view that Jesus was no less than the presence of God within the human circle. They would have agreed with Muhammad that he was a good man, a prophet, but certainly not divine. The debate goes on as to how we should speak and think of Jesus and this debate should be part of continuing Islamic-Christian dialogue. Even though we may be unable to agree, in my judgement, we will both be enriched by the journey of shared exploration.

Muslim friends have often said to me, "we too believe in Jesus." But the Muslim Jesus differs greatly from the portrait of Jesus found in the four Gospels of the New Testament. The Qur'anic account (3:42) of the child Jesus forming birds from clay may reflect a similar story in the rejected Infancy Gospel of Thomas but it is a long way removed from the picture of Jesus presented in the Christian New Testament. For Christians the greatness of Jesus lies elsewhere than in stories like this. Christians reading about Jesus in the Qur'an miss the story of his crucifixion and resurrection, the beauty and challenge of his teaching, and any reference to his hospitable way of life, his support of the poor and the marginalised, his dream of a new society that would reflect the love and generosity of God.

CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION.

The crucifixion of Jesus is of utmost importance to Christians. We believe it to be an event that happened. The significance of the crucifixion to Christianity is reflected in the extended accounts

of his trial and death at the hands of first century political leaders found in each of the four Gospels. Good Friday and Easter, days when Christians meditate on the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are the highpoint of the Christian year. Christians are not embarrassed by the crucifixion of Jesus as a criminal. Indeed it is, to us, the surest evidence that God shares the suffering of humanity and identifies fully with the struggle of all who seek a new society and who endure whatever pain and tough times the journey entails. This is at the heart of Christian believing. God is understood as “the fellow sufferer who understands” and who weaves the suffering, the devotion and the prayers of those who follow the way of love into the healing of the world. The church has never settled on one single understanding of the meaning of Jesus’ death but no Christian theologian has denied the crucifixion. The church has always recognised it to be the supreme embodiment of the love of God in action. There is nothing sentimental or otherworldly about the love of God. God is present in, with and for, the victims of human cruelty, those pushed to the margins of society, those who yearn for a new society but feel overwhelmed by the power of those who cling to injustice, violence and privilege because they lack compassion and mercy. I encourage you to read the Gospel accounts of the death of Jesus. The apostle Paul, writing just thirty years after the crucifixion wrote of Jesus: “though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality of God as something to be exploited but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...and he humbled himself to the point of death- even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name...” (Phil 2:6-12).

Similarly, the resurrection of Jesus is of vital importance for Christians, though we still argue about what actually happened on the third day after Jesus’ death. (Christians tend to begin by doubting seemingly miraculous happenings). While the traditional view is that the Gospels describe an event through which a man was literally raised from death and remained with his disciples for 40 days another view is that the resurrection of Jesus refers to a spiritual encounter with the continuing presence of Jesus, initially by his disciples, but since with multitudes of believers. The resurrection is the Christian way of asserting that the way of life pioneered by Jesus, the pathway of hospitality, peacemaking, non- violence and forgiveness will never be ultimately defeated by the powers of greed, violence and selfishness. Christians recognise the presence of evil in life but they are shaped by optimism that God’s love can and will overcome whatever damages life. For Christians the resurrection is confirmation that not even death can separate us from the love of God.

I appreciate that it is difficult for Muslims to accept the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus, for they are explicitly denied in the Qur’an, but you may come to respect and appreciate why these things are so important to the Christian community. I would hope you might find time to read and reflect on the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke and to reflect on his style of non-violent, hospitable and forgiving love. When Christians read the words and deeds of Jesus, allowing themselves to be questioned and challenged by what they read, it is as though we are in the presence of Jesus himself, hearing afresh his call to break with harmful ways of living and to share in the healing of God’s world.

QUR’AN AND BIBLE.

For centuries the Qur’an, so precious to Islam, was set aside by the Church as of little or no significance for those engaged in the spiritual quest. Today it is increasingly recognised by Christian scholars as among the written treasures of human spirituality. To hear the recitation of the Qur’an at a shared event is, for me, a highlight of the occasion. Christians find it a difficult book to read. While the books of the Bible generally tell a single, chronological story of a people on their journey with God the Qur’an moves backwards and forwards in historical time. While the Bible has many human authors whose influence can be recognised in different writing styles and

differing understandings of God's presence in life, the Qur'an seems to be written in a more uniform style as befits the record of a single man's experience of God's presence. In a sense our holy books remain partially closed to each other for their deepest meaning is released as they are read within their respective faith communities. However there is no doubt that the reading of each other's holy books is an important part of the experience of "crossing over," and of growth in our appreciation of the other. They are both living books that require sensitivity to God, a willingness to be changed by our reading and a prayerful spirit if they are to be channels of God's word to us. We are in agreement on this.

The greatest difficulty Christians have in reading the Qur'an is the assertion that the words of the book, written in Arabic, are literally the words of God untouched by human influence. Christians, on the other hand, recognise that the marks of human effort are present in every part of the Bible. The humanity of the Bible is further demonstration to Christians that God uses human effort in the communication of divine truth. For centuries enormous effort has been expended on study of the cultural, political, social and religious background of each book of the Bible. This intense study has helped us enormously in our understanding of the meaning of this precious treasure. When Christians describe the Bible as the Word of God we do not mean it is the words of God in the way Muslims seem to regard the Qur'an. For Christians the Word of God breaks through from beyond the words of the text summoning us to be servants of the servant God and to receive life as a gift of love. The reading of the Bible is more than a mechanical reading of words on a page. It is more like wrestling with ourselves and with God asking that we might be blessed by God and enabled to share in God's healing of the world. For Christians truth is not static. We believe that the Spirit of God leads us into new truth as we search for the best way to serve the divine purposes in changing circumstances.

As I "cross over" into the world of Islam I miss the Christian recognition that our holy books are both gifts of God and products of human effort. I am aware, however, of a debate within Muslim circles about these matters. Some claim that the Qur'an, like the Bible, should be studied in the light of the historical and social conditions at the time it was written and should be interpreted metaphorically rather than literally. They suggest the Qur'an is both human and divine, a cultural product that takes its shape from a particular time in history and that the language of the Qur'an is a human invention, the language of the people of a particular, historically conditioned culture. Should the Qur'an be studied in the same critical way that Christians study their Bible? It is a question I must ask as I reflect on my "crossing over" experience. I appreciate the reluctance to engage in such study given the view that the words being studied are literally the words of God. I can only say that such disciplined, patient and prayerful study has led to a deepening of Christian sensitivity to the Word of God within the words of the Bible. Yet, having said that, I must also acknowledge that my way of reading the Bible would not be accepted by all Christians.

Among the difficulties in Islamic-Christian dialogue is the insistence that only what conforms to the words of the Qur'an can be accepted as truthful. The Christian view is that God's truth cannot be frozen in the formulations of a past age. The Spirit is always leading us to new truth. For example, Christians have had to come to terms with portions of their scriptures that we now believe are in error. The killing of thousands by Joshua are now regarded as a mistaken response to the will of God rather than as deeds to be emulated by later generations. There are passages in the New Testament that promote a form of anti-Semitism that has left a dark stain on human history. Such passages are part of a first century argument that is best left in that time and place, but for centuries these words were treated by the church as though they represented truth for all times. Tremendous harm was done because Christians were unwilling to rethink ancient attitudes and hear a new word from God.

Shared study of our holy books and sharing how we read and interpret them is a new frontier for thoughtful inter-faith dialogue. There is much to occupy us on this frontier.

SHARING A VISION

If our appreciation of the presence of God in life is the central conviction we share, the human corollary of this is that we also share the vision of a healed world - a world shaped by human expressions of the compassion and mercy of God. I welcome the words of the Qur'an where the world is described as being a single community. The same emphasis is to be found in both Hebrew and Christian scripture. We share a dream of a world where children can grow up in harmony with their neighbours, where our young men no longer fight the wars of their elders, where every race and nation is treated with respect and where religious difference has become a gift rather than a curse.

I have used the words "the healing of the world" a number of time in this paper. This is the common task we share. We live in a dangerous world, divided, violent and blind to the demands of love. Here is the point at which shared action in the service of the common good is needed between Muslims, Jews and Christians. God, I am sure, is more interested in how well we serve the possibilities of peace than in the finer points of our belief systems.

There is an uncomfortable truth we must face together as we seek the healing of the world. There is strong historical evidence that the monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, have brought a disproportionate amount of violence and aggression into human history. Some argue there is an inevitable tendency within monotheistic faiths to treat others badly in the certainty that we alone are the bearers of truth and that those who believe differently are to be changed so that they adopt the same faith. Violence is justified by the belief that those who believe differently are outside the love and care of God and stand in the way of the triumph of God's purposes. So the crusades were justified in the middle ages and recent acts of terrorism claim similar justification for actions that cannot find a home within the purposes of a compassionate and merciful God.

It is claimed by a number of recent authors that each of the monotheistic faiths is prey to this tendency to violence. Certainly our shared history is stained with the blood of people killed in the name of God who it was believed sought their destruction. Confident in our possession of truth we often treat others badly and as less than fully human. Is there a basic suspicion, distrust, even hatred of those who are different that lives among us and finds justification in the assertion that our group alone is chosen of God and is sole possessor of God's truth? Does a certain arrogance and disregard for others often accompany the belief that God has revealed Himself to us, in our history, and this truth is hidden from others?

In each of our holy books, Hebrew Bible, Christian New Testament and Qur'an, one can find, if one goes looking, two streams of thinking - one is positive and generous towards all people and the other is vindictive and distrustful of the neighbour who is different. We must each choose which stream of our differing traditions we live from as we seek to live as friends of God in our time and place.

We need to help our people to live from the gentle and generous centre of faith rather than from the ragged, distrustful, and violent edges of life. Perhaps we who share a deep and distinctive conviction about the oneness and unity of God can assist each another to avoid the dreadful tendency to violence that haunts our world.

So I cross back to my Christian home, thoughtful, enriched and with many questions. I would like to hear the report of a Muslim who, having "crossed over" and returned, can share his or her

understanding of Christianity, I'd like to hear the questions, possibilities and perhaps fresh wisdom they carry home with them.

Thankyou again, to those who invited me to address this important topic.

Keith Rowe
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