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**FROM ISLAM TO CHRISTIANITY:
A STUDY IN THE LIFE AND THOUGHT OF
HASSAN DEHQANI-TAFTI AND JEAN-MOHAMMED ABD-EL-JALIL
IN THE ONGOING SEARCH FOR A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING
BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM**

Sr Agnes Angela Wilkins OSB

Submitted in accordance with the requirements of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

York St John University

School of Humanities, Religion and Philosophy

June 2018

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ABSTRACT

The thesis is an attempt to understand Islam from the inside, as a gesture of respect and friendship to Islam and Muslims, in the belief that true dialogue cannot proceed without this. It means admitting the great gulf, despite the good things we have in common, that separates the two religions. Doctrinal differences have been honestly discussed and analysed, with no attempt made to smooth over the difficulties.

Two converts from Islam to Christianity, Hassan Dehqani-Tafti and Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, whose life stories and writings form the core of the thesis, illustrate perfectly in their different situations the difficulties, even agony, involved in leaving Islam to embrace Christianity. As men who have known both Islam and Christianity from the inside, their writings are particularly valuable to deepen our understanding of Islam. They present a contrast in that one is an Anglican, a bishop and family man, whilst the other became a Catholic and a celibate Franciscan; yet both in their different ways shed much light on their experience of Islam. Kenneth Cragg was very influential in the life of Hassan, and this is given due recognition as Hassan's writing is explored.

The accounts of the life and writings of the two converts are preceded by a study examining the phenomenon of conversion from various secular perspectives and, building on the expressed hopes of the converts, are followed by a look into the future which consists of interdisciplinary approaches to the text of the Qur'an as, for example, in Qur'anic Studies where Muslim, Christian (and other) scholars collaborate together to obtain deeper insights into the holy book of Islam, a development which undoubtedly would have been warmly welcomed by both Hassan Dehqani-Tafti and Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1 General background

‘Interreligious and intercultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to an optional extra. It is in fact a vital necessity on which in large measure our future depends.’¹ This quote is part of an address given by Pope Benedict XVI at a gathering of young people in Cologne on World Youth Day 2005, and summarises succinctly the underlying purpose of my thesis, as well as capturing a sense of the urgency of the dialogue with Islam in our times. However, the thesis might more accurately be called ‘an essay in understanding’ because before dialogue in any depth can take place there must be an attempt to understand the other. This is a basic courtesy, and a gesture of friendship which should always precede dialogue. Even this basic attempt to understand is not an easy task. Christians may even wonder, for instance, why Islam has appeared at all, and Muslims may question why after so many centuries of Islam Christianity has not totally disappeared. Evidently we are meant to live alongside one another and continue taking tentative steps toward peace and reconciliation, however slow and painful it may appear to be at times.

The relationship between Islam and Christianity has indeed been fraught for centuries with antagonism, bitterness and polemic, evidence of which is not difficult to find.² However, there has arguably been a breakthrough in the Catholic Church with the promulgation of the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate*.³ This document is remarkable for the fact that it is ‘the first time in the history of the Church that the Magisterium, in solemn Council, advocates an attitude of esteem and

¹ See Barbara Wood and Andrew Unsworth, *Before and After Regensburg: Pope Benedict XVI, Interreligious Dialogue and Islam*, pp. 44-68, in *A Catholic-Shia Dialogue: Ethics in Today's Society*, ed. Anthony O'Mahony, Timothy Wright and Mohammad Ali Shomali, Melisende, London, 2008, here at p. 63.

² See, for instance, Clinton Bennet, *Understanding Christian-Muslim Relations, Past and Present*, Continuum, London, 2008, which describes all the major conflicts.

³ Not all scholars agree on the importance of this rather minimal document, but no Catholic theologian can afford to ignore it when approaching other religions. See bibliography for pertinent studies.

of friendship toward Islam and the Muslims.’⁴ The first sentence of *Nostra Aetate* para.3 begins:

‘Upon the Moslems too, the Church looks with esteem.’ Referring to this document fifty years later Sydney Griffith has said:

This brief document was destined to change the Church’s approach to other people of faith, especially Jews and Muslims. It includes two short paragraphs that almost immediately resulted in a paradigm shift in the Roman Catholic Church’s relations with the world’s Muslims... the text goes on to highlight points of coincidence in faith between Christians and Muslims albeit with crucial differences on each point: the worship of the one God; God’s word to humankind; submission to God’s decrees on the model of Abraham; reverence for Jesus and Mary, his virgin mother; and work for peace and justice in the world in view of the Day of Judgement.⁵

As can be noted from the above, what separates Christians and Muslims is still much greater than what unites us. What has changed is the respectful, non-polemical approach to Islam, in that the document tries to find resonances rather than emphasise and condemn the differences. This ‘paradigmatic’ change is largely due to the ground-breaking work of Louis Massignon, who after his re-conversion to Christianity in a Muslim environment in Iraq, devoted his life to the study of Islam. His positive approach filtered through to Vatican Council II through his friendship with Pope Paul VI.⁶ He was the godfather of one of my subjects, Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, at his baptism, and was closely connected with him over many years. Although they were very familiar with each other’s thought, it was not a typical master/disciple relationship, for although Abd-el-Jalil was the ‘disciple’, he could sometimes correct the ‘master’.

The improvement in the Church’s relationship with the Jews since the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* has been remarkable, (whether this is reciprocated from the Jewish perspective, however, cannot be taken for granted; much healing may still needed to correct a long-standing negative attitude of Christianity towards Judaism). Anti-Semitism, which used to be endemic in Christianity, if often unrecognised and unacknowledged, is now anathema. Judaism is the matrix of

⁴ Robert Caspar, *Islam according to Vatican II: On the Tenth Anniversary of Nostra Aetate*, in *Encounter: Documents for Muslim-Christian Understanding*, 21, Roma, Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islam, Jan. 1976.

⁵ Sydney Griffith, from the Foreword to Christian S. Krokus, *The Theology of Louis Massignon: Islam. Christ and The Church*, Washington DC, The Catholic University of America Press, 2017, p. ix.

⁶ For a concise account of these events see *Louis Massignon: L’Hospitalité Sacré*, Préface par René Voillaume, Textes inédits présentés par Jacques Keryell, nouvelle cité, Paris 1987, esp. p.33-75.

Christianity and the Hebrew Scriptures, completely intact, have become an integral and indispensable part of Christianity. Christians and Jews are very close, especially since Jesus himself was a Jew. He had a distinctly Jewish mentality and the Hebrew Scriptures were his own. The more Christians can appreciate this, the better they can understand and appreciate their own religion, as well as Judaism.

It must be admitted that the relationship with Islam has not undergone a like transformation, although slow progress is being made. A good example of this is the work done by the Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islam in Rome, now over fifty years old, which is devoted exclusively to the task of promoting understanding among Christians and Muslims, as it offers degrees to its students in the Arabic Language, the Qur'an, and all that concerns Islam. Its publications, and 'the wide range of its activities allows the staff to be of service to the Local Churches around the world wherever Christian-Muslim dialogue is to be promoted in a spirit of truth and love.'⁷ Knowledge and familiarity with Islam and the Qur'an are vital if Christians and Muslims are to live alongside one another peaceably.

Islam, for many Christians, is very challenging. It was not to be expected, in mainstream Christianity, that another major religion claiming a universal mission should appear after the Christian revelation. Maurice Borrmans has described its impact thus:

Making its appearance with Muhammad's preaching at Mecca (610-622), then at Yathrib, later called Madina (622-632), Islam was almost immediately opposed to the two monotheisms that had preceded it, the Jews and the Christians, with the aim of correcting them in the name of the pure monotheism of the very origins of humanity, that of Abraham, and before him, of Noah, and of Adam himself.⁸

On this topic the Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

⁷ Maurice Borrmans, *Le Pisai: Cinquantte Ans au Service du Dialogue*, in *islamochristiana* 25, pub. Pontificio Instituto di Studi Arabi e d'Illamistica, Roma 1999, pp. 87-104, here at p. 104.

⁸ *Catholic Engagement with World Religions: A Comprehensive Study*, Eds. Karl J. Becker & Ilaria Morali, with the collaboration of Maurice Borrmans and Gavin D'Costa, Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 2009. See Ch.24, 'Islam as it Understands itself' by Maurice Borrmans, p. 487. However it should be pointed out that even within Islam there are some scholars who believe the Qur'an was meant only for Arabs. See, for instance, Jacques Jomier OP, *the Bible and the Qur'an*, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1964, Ch 3 'Muhammad's Universal Mission According to the Qur'an', pp. 7-16, in which he argues that the traditional understanding developed gradually over time after the Prophet's lifetime.

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son (Heb.1:1-2). Christ, the Son of God made man, is the Father's one, perfect and unsurpassable Word. In him he has said everything; there will be no other word than this one.⁹

Against this, Islam claims to annul both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, in a way which 'actually nullifies the continuing validity of those traditions themselves', an abrogation based on the Jewish and Christian Scriptures as 'textually and semantically corrupt'.¹⁰ This Islamic belief is derived from the understanding that Muhammad is the 'seal' of the prophets (Q3:40), and the fact that the Qur'an specifically states that, due to deliberate interference, Jews and Christians no longer possess authentic Scriptures.¹¹

It may be painful for Christians to become aware that this is how they are viewed by Islam, but it is good to remember that Jews suffered this humiliation in the eyes of Christianity for centuries. As we move forward it is to be hoped that Islam will accept that neither Judaism nor Christianity are abrogated. Tentative steps in this direction have been made, as outlined by Tim Winter in his article *The Last Trump Card: Islam and the Supersession of Other Faiths*, although he concludes that 'supersessionist theology is constitutive of Islam itself, and an indispensable justification for its existence.'¹²

It is against this complex backdrop that my research takes shape.

2 Genesis of my research

My research is motivated by two factors. The first is the general situation of Muslim/Christian relations as described above, and the obvious need to deepen our understanding of one another in order to live together peaceably as we must in today's globalised world. In 2001 this was emphasised for me when I attended an interfaith meeting of monastics and other Christians, some religious, some laity, at which some Invited Muslims gave a presentation of their

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, paragraph 65, p. 22.

¹⁰ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Islam: a Challenge for Christianity*, from the journal *Concilium*, edited by Hans Kung and Jürgen Moltmann, 1994/3, pp. 116-123, here at p. 118.

¹¹ See Q2.75 and 4:46.

¹² *The Last Trump Card: Islam and the Supersession of Other Faiths*, in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* (1999)2, pp. 133-155, here at p. 153. Tim Winter, also known as Sheik Abdal Hakim Murad, is a Cambridge academic and a high profile convert to Islam from Christianity.

faith. I became acutely aware of the gap in our understanding of one another, despite good intentions, a willingness to learn, and an attitude of respect. The task of understanding was for me made all the more urgent by the terrorist incident of 9/11 (the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York), which happened shortly after this meeting. Since that time I have also become aware of a lack of understanding of Islam, even apathy towards trying to understand, in many of my fellow Christians (though there are exceptions). The Qur'an is not easy to read and I have found in general little interest in it among the Christians of my acquaintance. The point will be made in the thesis that there is also very little understanding of the Bible among Muslims; hence the need to grow closer in friendship and understanding. It may not be possible to overcome all our difficulties on the rational/doctrinal level, but we can at least try to understand the mentality and doctrinal position of the other in a generous spirit of acceptance of differences as part of friendship.

The second motivation of my research sprang from a chance encounter which brought me into contact with Margaret Dehqani-Tafti, the widow of Bishop Hassan Barnaba Dehqani-Tafti (1920-2008), a village boy from Taft in Iran who after his conversion to Christianity went on to become the first native bishop of the Anglican Church in Iran. Through correspondence and occasional meetings with Margaret before her death on Oct. 22, 2016, I came to 'know' her husband as a deeply spiritual man who understood the problems of Muslims in the face of Christianity, and in his writings was able to explain it to them in language they could understand. Through this experience I began to realise that a deeper understanding and respect between our two religions is possible, and that I might be able to make a contribution to this through undertaking a study of his life, especially of how he managed to negotiate the doctrinal differences between Islam and Christianity, such as the Oneness of God, as against the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus as understood by Christians, etc. Margaret Dehqani-Tafti gave me a small book written by her husband in which he described his conversion experience, and this became the basic building block around which my research developed.¹³ I have since acquired other books around his life, which will be used in the

¹³ H.B. Dehqani-Tafti, *Design of My World: Pilgrimage to Christianity*, The Seabury Press, New York, 1982.

biographical chapter devoted to him (Ch.4), and also his books which he wrote in Persian for his congregation when he was pastor, and then bishop, in Isfahan, Iran. These are not available in English but one of them has been privately translated for use in the thesis.

What is important for me in Hassan's life, especially after his conversion experience, is that he has knowledge of both Islam and Christianity from the inside. When I visited Margaret Dehqani-Tafti at the house where they lived together in his retirement in Oakham, Rutland, I was allowed to watch some videos made of Hassan preaching after he came to England. In one he spoke of his conversion, in which he began by saying that once you are a Muslim you are always a Muslim. That is the reason why he did not change his name, and he advised the same policy for all converts. As such there are 'Jewish Christians', 'pagan Christians', 'Zoroastrian Christians', etc. You 'put on' Christ, he said; baptism is not onto an empty personality. There is a whole personality belonging to a particular culture that is baptised. Former missionaries did not understand this, and by making people reject their past totally they made them almost hypocrites. It is not a contradiction in terms to have a 'Muslim Christian', but an enrichment for the Church. Conversion cannot mean forgetting what one is.¹⁴ .

The second subject of my research, Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, also had this experience of remaining Muslim after his conversion. In fact it was quite painful for him, as he continued to love Islam as much as he did Christianity, but was very aware of the deep gulf of understanding between them. Because of this I find his writings particularly valuable, because although they may seem at times to be negative towards Islam, he is not criticising in a polemical spirit, but speaking frankly from the heart about brothers whom he loves, trying to help his new Christian community understand the Muslim mentality, and also how Muslims from the inside perceive Christians, in order to try and bridge the gap of misunderstanding.

I chose a second subject for my thesis partly because of my own strong Catholic identity, coupled with the fact that in part my research is a response to the Vatican II document *Nostra*

¹⁴ From a talk given at St. Paul's church, Jersey, 23 September, 1989. This is my own summary of Hassan's words.

Aetate. I wanted a convert from Islam to Catholicism to complement my first choice of a convert from Islam to Anglicanism to bring myself back into the orbit of my Catholic identity, whilst at the same time making a gesture of ecumenical friendship towards the Anglican communion. Abd-el-Jalil seemed an ideal choice because as a Franciscan he belonged to a religious order which bears resemblance to my own Benedictine monastic order, and therefore I find it easy to empathise with his Franciscan lifestyle after his conversion. Although the lives of the two converts overlap, (Hassan died in 2008, Abd-el-Jalil in 1979) there is no evidence that they knew, or even knew of, each other, yet they complement each other for the purpose of my thesis, and also present a contrast. They complement each other in the manner of their struggle to embrace Christian doctrine, and the painful separation from family and cultural environment, which had an almost catastrophic effect on both of them. However they present a contrast in the manner of their conversion, that of Hassan being rather slow, hesitant to begin with, and long drawn out, while Abd-el-Jalil's was a sudden, unexpected occurrence (although I will argue that in fact there was some preparation although not seen by him as such at the time, as all conversion is far more complex than the actual 'moment' of change from one religion to another). These two men, their life stories and writings, are the basic framework around which everything else in the thesis revolves.

3 Overall aim and research questions

My overall aim is to obtain a deeper understanding of Islam. To that end the research questions I aim to address are as follows:

Will the study of these two converts who have known Islam and Christianity from the inside, help outsiders to obtain an insider's view of Islam?

Building on the doctrinal issues raised in their writings, are there ways in which Islam and Christianity can draw closer together on this level?

Could anything in the writings of these two men offer any guidance, or pointers, for a way forward in our present day struggles to improve Muslim/Christian relations?

I see these questions within a wider framework of much larger questions, these being the place of

Islam in God's Providence and whether Islam is a way of salvation in its own right apart from Christianity, along with other non-Christian religions. Although these ongoing issues of research are in the background, they are too large to be included in the thesis.

What I have accomplished in this thesis has other original elements which should also contribute to academic scholarship. It is a positive factor that because my subjects have been dead for some years, their full story can be told with all the drama that such conversions from Islam to Christianity can entail. Both my chosen converts are little known in the English speaking world and their writings not at all, unless in the original languages (Persian and French).

4 Further research

There is much scope for further research on different aspects of conversion from Islam to Christianity, although it is a sensitive topic because of the Islamic doctrine of apostasy.¹⁵ It is generally a serious offence for a Muslim to defect from his or her religion, equivalent to 'the renunciation of God himself', even though in fact 'the Qur'an makes it clear that nothing in the law governing apostates and apostasy derives from the letter of the holy text.'¹⁶ Because of this difficulty there is little information available for instance, on statistics; the reasons for conversion; how many persevere in their new faith; is it easier in a Western environment than in Muslim majority countries etc. My own research concentrates mainly on doctrinal issues, though as will be seen, these cannot be separated from wider issues which may be more appropriate to the domain of social/cultural studies. The question of doctrinal differences, which in the past has tended to be avoided because of its difficulty, is certainly an area which needs further research.

There follows an account of the present state of research concerning conversion from Islam to Christianity in its wider context. It will be noted that the number of Muslims converting to Christianity in the present century is increasing, which makes any research which enhances mutual understanding all the more important.

¹⁵ See Wael Hallaq, *Apostasy in The Encyclopaedia of The Qur'an*, General Editor Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2001, Vol.1, pp. 119-122, for an outline of Islamic belief on this topic.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 119 and p. 122.

5 Current research on conversion from Islam to Christianity

Studies on conversion from Islam to Christianity at present in existence are few. They include the research of Jean-Marie Gaudeul which grew out of his wide missionary experience.¹⁷ Statistics are mere guesswork, he believes, but what is abundantly clear to him is that ‘there are no tidal waves of conversion in either direction.’¹⁸ He tentatively suggests that ‘perhaps two or three hundred Muslims ask for conversion in France every year.’¹⁹ His work has value in that from the many individuals he has interviewed, he has classified and expanded on the reasons for their conversion.

A very valuable legal study on religious freedom, which directly affects the issue of conversion from Islam to Christianity, has been done by Kristine Kalanges.²⁰ She traces the history of human rights law as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which Islamic Law will not subscribe.²¹ The Islamic stance denies Muslims the right under international law to officially change their religion, if they so desire. As a lawyer she is suggesting as a possible solution a ‘world legal tradition’ which would encompass both Islamic and Western traditions. Religious freedom is ‘a crucial aspect of human dignity’, and a ‘theological jurisprudence rooted in love of God and love of neighbour and informed by reason’, needs in the future to be achieved, she concludes.²² This is undoubtedly still very much a ‘work in progress’

Much research, especially on statistics has been done by Ibn Warraq (1946-).²³ He has observed that over the last fifteen years many books, in the nature of autobiographies, have been

¹⁷ Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Called from Islam to Christ: Why Muslims become Christians*, London, Monarch Books 1999. Gaudeul is a Missionary of Africa who has taught at the Catholic Institute of Paris and the Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islam. His doctorate is in Arabic and Islamic Studies.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Ch.1, *Yes, Conversion is Possible*, pp. 1-29, here at p. 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁰ Kristine Kalanges, *Religious Liberty in Western and Islamic Law: Toward a World Legal Tradition*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2012. The author holds a JD from Harvard Law School, and is at present Associate Professor of Law in the faculty of Notre Dame Law School, USA,

²¹ See especially *ibid.*, Ch.4 *Religious Liberty and Shar’ia*, p. 82-101.

²² *Ibid.* Ch.7 *Conclusion: Toward a world legal tradition*, p168-181, here at p180/1

²³ Ibn Warraq is the pen name of an anonymous Indian author who was educated at Edinburgh University. Himself an ex-Muslim of no religious allegiance, he is the founder of the Institute for the Secularisation of Islamic Society. He has written several books, in one of which, *Leaving Islam*, he claims there are large numbers of ex-Muslims embracing Christianity. Information accessed on the internet, 18 Oct. 2017.

published by Muslims who have converted to Christianity, including by former terrorists. He has also noted that the internet is 'full of Christian sites with the testimonies of former Muslims.'²⁴ According to his research an Algerian newspaper (*Al-Yawm*, in late December 2000) reported numerous conversions in a certain area of the country, Greater Kabylie, where two churches had been built, originally in great secrecy, but now the number of citizens embracing Christianity has grown rapidly. Twelve years later he noted an online journal (*Ilaf*) reported numerous conversions, not denied by the government, although it was still a subject not openly discussed. Today the U.S Bureau of Democracy & Human Rights of the Department of State estimates that the number of non-Muslims in Algeria has reached 500,000, and there are 300 churches, mostly in the above mentioned Kabylie region.²⁵ A similar growth, but on a smaller scale, has been noted in Morocco, the homeland of Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, who suffered so greatly on account of his embracing Christianity in the 1920's.

Ibn Warraq reports that there are at present around twenty Christian television channels broadcasting to the Islamic world, one of which, Al-Hayat Television, broadcasting from bases in Europe and the United States, is run by a certain Brother Rachid, a Moroccan convert from Islam to Christianity, who had a strict Muslim upbringing in his native Morocco, rather like Abd-el-Jalil. His father was an imam and as a devout Muslim he memorised large portions of the Qur'an. Now he devotes all his time to defending the right of Muslims to convert to Christianity, or simply change their religion as they see fit. He reports many converts in Morocco over the past ten years (between 40 and 60,000, but as has already been mentioned, statistics can be unreliable). These converts are now seemingly pressing for the right to practice their religion freely in Morocco, give Christian names to their children, and own a Bible in Moroccan Arabic, etc. This represents considerable progress since the time of Abd-el-Jalil's youth, including his near tragic return after some time in his Franciscan friary.

Ibn Warraq goes on to report on the wide ranging research of David Garrison, as reported in

²⁴ *New English Review*, February 2016, *Conversions from Islam to Christianity* by Ibn Warraq

²⁵ *Ibid.*

his book *A Wind in the House of Islam* (Colorado, Wigtake Resources 2014). Overall Garrison estimates the number of new Christians from Islam to be in the region of between two and seven million, which although only a drop in the ocean of the overall world Muslim population, is nevertheless significant. Of particular interest for my own thesis is Garrison's information on Iran, the homeland of Hassan Dehqani-Tafti. He notes that 64% of the population were born after the 1979 Islamic Revolution after which Hassan had to flee the country, his work in the Christian mission in tatters and his son murdered. These young people apparently have little affection for the Revolution, and as a result Christianity is growing rapidly, as also many other worldviews, including secularism, atheism, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism. For Christians the House Church is the most common place for Muslim converts to worship. As a conservative estimate Garrison believes this movement would have 100,000 followers. Thanks to Christian satellite television, he says, Iranian Diasporan Christian pastors, in the last five to ten years, have had an enormous influence over their fellow Iranians at home.

Finally brief mention must be made of the research conducted by Kathryn Ann Kraft on converts from Islam to Christianity in Lebanon and Egypt.²⁶ She approaches her subject from a sociological perspective, based on extensive interviews of individual converts, to learn their experience of living as a Christian among compatriots who may not know their Christian identity, as in the current climate it is safer to keep it secret. She has noted the paucity of research on this topic. She also notes, without being able to quote accurate statistics because of the need for secrecy, that there would seem to be more converts than one would expect. She quotes a figure of 100,000 known converts in one Arab country alone (not named). This is due in large part, she believes, to the growing trend towards individuality and choice.²⁷ Kraft's research was conducted in the field with some risk both to herself and her interviewees, and is of considerable value for the ongoing research into this topic.

²⁶ Her PhD was completed for the Department of Sociology at Bristol University in 2007, the title being *Community and Identity among Arabs of a Muslim Background who choose to Follow a Christian Faith*.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

My own research, although on the same topic of conversion from Islam to Christianity, varies considerably from the above in both content and methodology. I give below a brief outline of the thesis as it will develop.

6 Plan of thesis

After Chapter Two which outlines my methodology I devote Chapter Three to a broad, sociological study of conversion to give a wider context and grounding to the more religious/theological accounts that follow. Chapters Four and Five are devoted to the biographical accounts of my two chosen converts, Hassan Dehqani-Tafti and Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil. These accounts are not mere recitation of facts, but are lively narratives very much coloured by my own Christian perspective, a matter I will explore in my methodology. It is my conviction that any biography, however secular it may be in appearance, is a sacred thing in itself, being the place where God's grace works itself out in a human life. Kenneth Cragg, who was a close friend and mentor of Hassan, has said that 'a biography can carry significance for God as giving visibility through time and space to the grace and compassion of God.'²⁸ It is also the seedbed from which the writings of the two converts spring. Chapters Six and Seven are devoted to their writings, first a rather long chapter devoted to two books written by Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, *L'Islam et Nous*, and *Aspects Intérieures de L'Islam*, and then Hassan Dehqani-Tafti's *Chimes of Church Bells*, which even in its title echoes Kenneth Cragg's ground-breaking work, *The Call of the Minaret*.²⁹

These four chapters (4, 5, 6 and 7) are the core of the thesis around which the rest revolves. The writings of my two subjects present a contrast in that Hassan is writing principally for Muslims and the converts and potential converts to Christianity he had in his own congregation in Isfahan, Iran, and Jean-Mohammed principally for a Christian readership whom he is trying to enlighten about the complexities of Islamic doctrine and practice, to promote mutual understanding. I use these chapters to develop further some important issues they have raised, not in any systematic

²⁸ From the Editor's Postscript of H.B. Dehqani-Tafti. *The Unfolding Design of My World: A Pilgrim in Exile*, edited by Kenneth Cragg, Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2000, p. 265.

²⁹ Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (third edition), Oneworld, Oxford, 2000 (first edition 1956)

way, but in order as they occur. In the two works of Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, mentioned above, which form the content of Chapter Six, a number of topics are raised, including monotheism, God as Father and Creator, the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad. Certain character traits of Muslims are explained such as their conviction of being 'chosen', fatalism, and their attitude to sin. In this chapter I develop in more depth Jean-Mohammed's treatment of the Qur'an and what he says about the Prophet, especially trying to answer the question of why Christians do not venerate him as much as Muslims might wish. The question of original sin also receives some extended treatment. In Chapter Seven which deals with Hassan Dehqani-Tafti's *Chimes of Church Bells*, a similar approach is taken. Here the main topic which receives extended treatment is the crucifixion. This topic is also further developed in Chapter Eight. This emphasis is entirely appropriate as it is at the heart of Christianity, and a major stumbling block in Muslim/Christian understanding. This concerns not only the doctrine of redemption that it represents, but even whether it actually happened at all, in the face of traditional Muslim denial of this fact. Hassan also deals with prophecy, the nature of God, the Incarnation and the Trinity.

In the above chapters most of the issues which divide Islam and Christianity are identified, and the most important ones given extended, in-depth analysis and discussion. Chapter Eight takes up suggestions of both my subjects about the way the Muslim/Christian relationship might improve in the future. The emphasis is again on the Qur'an, as being as important in Islam as the crucifixion and the divinity of Jesus are in Christianity. This time the emphasis is on how it might be interpreted less rigidly in the twenty first century. Finally there is a concluding chapter where I review the key findings of my research and indicate the contribution this research can make to the further evolution of Muslim-Christian dialogue.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

1 Introduction

In his Introduction to *Method in Theology*¹, Bernard Lonergan describes methodology as ‘not a set of rules to be followed meticulously by a dolt. It is a framework for collaborative creativity’.² This suggests the freedom to draw in all that affects my research, while at the same time giving it a firm framework. By far the most prominent and defining characteristic of my own research is what I would call a ‘monastic methodology’. Complementing this is an approach called ‘methodological agnosticism’, which I modify with some consideration of reflexivity in order to know, understand and acknowledge my own bias, something which is actually present in every writer or researcher whether or not they are consciously aware of it. My ‘monastic methodology’ might be described as an approach ‘from within’, that is, it springs from a strong basis of faith and Christian commitment which is found in monasteries, whereas methodological agnosticism by comparison is, from my perspective, ‘from without’, in that I try to stand back from, or bracket, my own religious commitment in an effort to be as objective as possible. These approaches need not be contradictory but can enrich one another. As Ninian Smart affirms: ‘What we need to do ultimately in the study of religion is to break down that simplified opposition between learning about religion and feeling the living power of religion. The two can go together and indeed must go together’³ My own methodology must serve the purpose of answering the question as to how, as a committed Christian insider, I can best understand as if from the inside a religion which is very different from my own. Because my research is primarily book based, my methodology of necessity focuses mainly on attitudes, approaches and orientations. I begin, therefore, with a general discussion of the outsider-insider problem within which my research is situated, to be followed later in the chapter by

¹ Bernard Lonergan SJ, *Method in Theology*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1973 (second edition), *Introduction*, p. xi.

² *Ibid.*

³ Ninian Smart, *The Science of Religion & the Sociology of Knowledge: Some Methodological Questions*, Princeton University Press, 1973, p. 160.

some discussion on 'monastic methodology', methodological agnosticism and reflexivity, all of which play an important part in my approach to Islam.

2 The Insider/Outsider problem

N. Ross Reat has helpfully divided the different approaches to this problem into four distinct categories. The first of these is the 'Insider to Insider' method whereby, for instance, only someone born and raised a Buddhist can hope to understand Buddhism, and an outsider can only understand by converting and studying what the tradition teaches.⁴ Secondly there is the 'insider to outsider' approach whereby a valid understanding of religion, by contrast, can only be obtained by an objective outsider who obtains information from an insider informant. This Ross Reat describes as the anthropological approach.⁵ Similar to this is the third method, that of 'outsider to outsider', an approach which tends to neglect informants altogether in a desire to concoct a 'grand, comparative scheme which fits all religions', but without any consultation with genuine insiders it can, and does, result in gross misrepresentations of a religion from the insider's perspective.⁶ Finally there is the 'outsider to insider' position whereby a religious insider attempts to learn something about a religion from outside his or her own tradition, normally from an insider with reference to some other tradition. This approach Ross Reat describes as 'dialogue', which, he says, 'can only occur when a sincere, self-aware religious insider attempts to learn something about religion from outside his or her own tradition'.⁷ The outsider in this case would normally be an insider with respect to some other religion. This is my own method, whereby as a committed insider, I am seeking information from two men who, through conversion, have been committed insiders with reference to both Islam and Christianity.

A more recent article on the insider/outsider issue, however, has argued with some

⁴ N. Ross Reat, *Insiders and Outsiders in the Study of Religious Traditions*, in *Journal of the American Academy of Religions*, LI/3, pp. 460-476, here at p. 460. This is a paper presented at the 1982 annual meeting of the AAR.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 460.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 461.

plausibility that the insider/outsider question is a 'pseudo-problem'.⁸ The Danish academic Jeppe Jensen argues that an outsider is able to know, in many instances, more about a given religion than a genuine insider. Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, for instance, speaking as a Muslim insider, believed that this was the case with Kenneth Cragg and Islam. Jensen concludes that 'one could at best say that the insider-outsider distinction refers to a gradient and not a rift...'.⁹ Ross Reat's categories, described above, are undoubtedly helpful, but Jensen's position is perhaps closer to the truth in practice. However I would still question whether anyone is able to really grasp the deepest inner core of another religion, even someone as erudite and spiritual as Kenneth Cragg. As Rudolph Otto has said: 'There is no religion in which it [the 'numinous', the 'holy'] does not live as the real innermost core, and without it, no religion would be worthy of the name.'¹⁰ As this numinous quality is beyond what can be accessed rationally, it is impossible to demonstrate whether it is, or is not, the same in every religion, or to know if one can access another religion without some experience of this 'numinous' quality. In my case it is an advantage that the two converts I have chosen can be presumed to have experienced this quality of the 'beyond' in both Islam and Christianity.

In a similar manner Russel T. McCutcheon, has described the outsider/insider 'problem' in terms of three approaches: the empathetic, the explanatory, and the agnostic, which corresponds roughly with Ross Reat's more clearly defined 'categories'.¹¹ My methodology embraces something of all three of these elements, but perhaps most prominently the first, the empathetic, which assumes that 'the gap between insiders and outsiders – a gap representing, for example, differences in class, gender, race, or religion – *can be*, and in fact *ought to be*, overcome, that one can leave one's skin behind and climb into another's, if only for a moment.'¹²

McCutcheon goes on to point out that it is normally taken for granted in works of fiction that the

⁸ Jeppe Sinding Jensen, *Revisiting the Insider-Outsider Debate: Dismantling a Pseudo-problem in the Study of Religion*, in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23, (2011), pp. 29-47.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁰ Russel T. McCutcheon, *op.cit.*, Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Chs.I-III, pp. 74-81, here at p. 77.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, *General Introduction*, pp. 1-11, here at p. 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

reader can access the mind and emotions of the various characters.¹³ With some effort, the same should apply to other religions. I would describe monasticism, in relation to Islam, as a strongly empathetic approach, which, however, needs balancing with a more scientific approach which McCutcheon would classify as 'explanatory', and a degree of agnosticism. I begin with the monastic element of my methodology, the 'empathetic' approach.

3 A monastic methodology

Monastic life is a strong insider Christian position in which I have been formed and as such it must inevitably be a part of my approach to Islam. However, as monasticism is generally not appreciated in Islam, some explanation is necessary to show that in fact, there is more affinity between monasticism and Islam than might at first appear, which would encourage an empathetic approach.

3.1 Background: monasticism in early Islam

It would seem that monasticism has been very much in the background of Islam's development from its earliest days. According to Sydney Griffith:

From well before the rise of Islam, and then well into the later Middle Ages, monasticism was a distinctive feature of Christian life, both in the milieu in which Islam was born, and in the Christian communities subsequently integrated into the world of Islam... Already in the fifth Christian century monks and their monasteries were plentiful on the borders of Arabia.¹⁴

How is it then that a negative, or at least an ambivalent attitude, developed in Islam towards monasticism and monks? The first place to look for an answer is in the Qur'an itself where there are four texts which deal with this topic; Q5:82; 9:31, 34, and 57:27. In these texts the Qur'an 'mirrors its ambivalent attitude to Christians at large', who are at the same time 'closest in affection to believers', there being among them 'priests and monks, and they are not arrogant' (Q5:82), but at

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁴ Sydney Griffith, *Monasticism and Monks*, in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, Vol.3, Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2003, pp. 405-7, here at p. 405.

the same time they 'take their rabbis and monks as lords besides God' (9:31).¹⁵ In further negative comment the Qur'an says that many of them 'devour the wealth of the people unjustly and turn [others] from the way of God' (9:34).¹⁶

A very controversial verse is Q57:27 which seem to suggest that monasticism is not from God but a human invention. But is the Qur'an really saying that? The verse reads: 'We put it into the hearts of those who followed him [i.e. Jesus] mercy, compassion and monasticism: they innovated/renovated/invented it; we prescribed for them only to please God, but they did not exercise a proper compliance.'¹⁷

On this reading, says Griffith, monasticism is understood to be something 'initially instituted by God', but subsequently 'Jesus' followers re-invented it and introduced innovations into it.'¹⁸ Unfortunately most Muslim commentators have understood it as saying, 'We put it into the hearts of those who followed him mercy and compassion. Monasticism they invented, 'and seemingly most interpreters favour some form of this reading. However, 'some earlier Muslim exegetes and some modern scholars have in fact entertained some theoretical possibility of the first reading'.¹⁹ Nevertheless in spite of this the fate of monasticism in the minds of Muslims seems to have been sealed quite early with the familiar hadith, 'There is no monasticism in Islam', and a controversial prophetic tradition which states that '[t]he monasticism of this community is jihad.'²⁰ According to Griffith many scholars have questioned the authenticity of this tradition, and he argues that '[t]hese traditions [including the hadith about 'no monasticism in Islam'] seem to have come into prominence in the context of debates among Muslim scholars in the early centuries about the legitimacy of Sufism.'²¹

Indeed a case could be made for the proposition that Sufism is the monasticism of Islam,

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 406.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.* This is Griffith's translation, where he gives the possible variations on the key verb which seems to suggest monasticism is merely a human invention, not required by God.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 406/7 In this reading there is no full stop between 'compassion' and 'monasticism'.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 407.

²¹ *Ibid.*

that is, its mystical strand, but I have chosen to restrict myself largely to mainstream Islam in the thesis.

To complete this description of monasticism's close connection with Islam in its early centuries, it is to be noted that 'Christian monks writing in Syriac, Greek and Arabic were the first to call attention to the doctrinal and moral challenges of Islam for Christianity'.²² They were also 'the first Christians to adopt Arabic as an ecclesiastical language, to write theology in Arabic, and to translate the Christian bible and other classical Christian texts into Arabic'.²³ In addition monasteries were often considered to be privileged places by Muslims and Christians alike where 'help could be sought and interreligious conversations could take place'.²⁴

In the next section I examine some characteristics of monasticism which have informed my research and might lead to an empathetic understanding of Islam.

3.2 Monasticism and Islam: some resemblances

Monasteries are composed of men and women from different backgrounds, united only by the bond of the Christian faith. In this they resemble, in miniature, the Islamic *umma*, the community, or brotherhood, which binds Muslims through their faith more strongly than they are bound through family relationships or cultural affinities. Secondly, the focus of the monastic community is the word of God in Scripture; the daily listening to and reading of this word in public and private, is the foundation of the life, just as the Qur'an is for the *umma*. Thirdly, monasticism is a life of submission through the vow of obedience which all monks take to a superior who represents for them the will of God. This word 'submission' is the very essence of Islam, in fact the very meaning of the word *islam*. Muslims submit to God who revealed his word through the Prophet Muhammed, as monastics submit to God whose Word is revealed in Jesus Christ, whose representative the Abbot or Abbess is believed to be in the monastery. Fourthly there is a strong similarity in the practice of coming together for regular times of common prayer to praise the

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Creator and intercede for the needs of mankind. Muslims meet in the mosque several times a day, and say prescribed prayers, just as monastics recite or sing the Divine Office with prescribed prayers which vary only with the feast being celebrated or the liturgical season. The sight of many men prostrating before the Creator in regular lines in a mosque is truly uplifting. Monastics in their public worship also have very orderly gestures, bowing, processions etc., which resembles the formality of worship in a mosque. As in the mosque the sexes are segregated, so also in the monastery. Finally there is the resemblance in dress. Monks and nuns wear long skirted habits, which bear resemblance to traditional Muslim attire during prayer. In fact it is not unknown in today's world for a nun in full habit to be mistaken for a Muslim woman. The *hijab* of the Muslim woman has nothing to do with monasticism, of course, yet it still creates an affinity.

3.3 Community life

There are elements of monastic life that are very formative, which inevitably come into play when the monastic is meeting members of other religions, or studying/researching another religion such as Islam. Perhaps the most important of these is the daily living of community life. As was said above, the community, which can be compared to the Islamic *umma*, is made up of people from different backgrounds, of different generations and temperaments, united only by their Christian faith and the desire to give themselves to God in this particular way of life. What is important as methodology is that one has to live long-term with, and learn to love, people who may be very different from oneself. This attitude informs one's approach to Islam where there may be doctrines and practices seemingly inimical to Christianity that one has to struggle to understand and even love, as one would one's monastic sisters and brothers. Paradoxically, despite being cut off more than most, the concerns of this world are very close to the monastic life and the separation often gives a deep sensitivity to everything human.

The negative critique of one's religion that is found in places in the Qur'an can be painful as the gap of incomprehension appears so wide, and any kind of *rapprochement* on the doctrinal level virtually impossible. A monastic would deal with this situation in the same way that he/she deals

with difficulties in community life, that is to love 'the other', to try and understand, to be patient over the long term - even long-suffering, to be prepared to live with differences, and above all to be charitable and not criticize the other for views and actions which appear 'wrong' though may, in fact, just be different.

3.4 Humility

There are certain virtues, and attitudes of mind that help in the task of trying to understand and relate to Islam, one of them being humility, which monastics spend a lifetime trying to attain. The Qur'an notes that monks 'are not arrogant' (Q5:82), which means by implication that they are humble. Humility is a virtue which is perhaps in general not well understood, but it is very central to the monastic life. What it does not mean or imply is a general demeaning of oneself and one's personal qualities. Etymologically it derives from the Latin noun *humus*; the earth, which might be understood as 'grounded' in reality. Therefore one can freely acknowledge one's personal gifts and good qualities and try to develop them. It is a matter of honesty to recognise the gifts of God, which vary with every individual, and the personal effort of each person to achieve their potential and vocation in life. A 'humble attitude' should also enable one to recognise the gifts of others which might be very different from one's own. This also applies to different personal characteristics, good or bad, which may on the surface be incomprehensible, or inimical, to the observer but have deep-seated roots in the other's personal history. All this is helpful as one approaches and tries to understand Islam and Muslims.²⁵ A 'humble' approach to another religion is very necessary: it is respectful, and able to live with differences which may elude human understanding.

3.5 Monastic theology

Monastic theology has its own distinctive ethos which inevitably comes into play when trying to grapple with the different theologies of other religions. Gregory Collins OSB describes it thus:

Monastic theology aims not just at theoretical or abstract knowledge but of the knowledge

²⁵ For a fuller treatment see *The Rule of St Benedict*, in Latin and English, Edited & Translated by Abbot Justin McCann, monk of Ampleforth, London, Burns & Oates, fourth impression 1969, Ch.7 *Of Humility*, pp. 36-48.

born of love as it emerges in spiritual experience. In the early monastic tradition this was known as vision or contemplation ('theoria' and 'speculatio'). The method put forward for attaining this kind of vision was firmly rooted in the Bible and the Jewish origins of Christianity and, in a quote which seems to bypass the rational/critical approach, 'medieval monastic writers used to say, love can go in where reason is required to wait at the door'.²⁶

This tradition, which continues today, is obviously a very contemplative way of 'doing theology'. From the Catholic perspective it is very much based on Scripture, the recognised Church Fathers and major theologians such as Thomas Aquinas, without thereby neglecting modern theologians, and is underpinned by a life of contemplation and the public prayer of the liturgy.

This contemplative, spiritual approach, however, can sometimes avoid or smooth over major differences, of which I will give an example in the work of the monk/theologian Christian de Chergé, which I would argue demonstrates that such a methodology needs to be balanced with other approaches. An over-empathetic approach needs to be aware of the danger of falling into the pitfall of 'appropriational distortion', which I will endeavour to avoid in my own work by combining the spiritual/theological approach with methodological agnosticism and reflexivity.

3.6 Appropriational distortion and Christian de Chergé.

Now well-known from the film *Of Gods and Men*, Christian de Chergé's monastic life was mostly lived out in the small community of Tibhirine in Algeria, where he became the superior for the final years of his life until all but two of them were abducted and killed by terrorists.²⁷ He managed to find more correspondences than most between Islam and monasticism/Christianity. In 1976, for instance, he 'presented the community with a written credo of his faith' which included the following:

Certain values of Islam are undeniably a stimulus to the monk in his own vocation. These include devotion to the Absolute, regular communal prayer, fasting, submission to the will of God, giving alms to the poor, offering hospitality, self-transformation, trust in Divine Providence and spiritual pilgrimage.²⁸

²⁶ Gregory Collins OSB, *Meeting Christ in His Mysteries: A Benedictine Vision of the Spiritual Life*, Dublin, The Columba Press, 2010, p. 8 and p. 192.

²⁷ A full account of the community can be found in John W. Kiser's work, *The Monks of Tibhirine: Love and Terror in Algeria*, New York, St Martin's Press, 2002.

²⁸ Collins, *op.cit.* p. 48.

He used to read the Qur'an and the Bible together since, for him, they complemented each other, and he gave regular conferences to the community on some aspect of Islam. He even managed to find something positive in those Qur'anic verses which traditionally deny the crucifixion (Q4:157) commenting that 'it was love, not nails, which attached him to the cross we carved for him. And it is love which draws us to him when he pardons his executioners.'²⁹ To portray the crucifixion in a way that would not scandalise Muslims, he commissioned an icon depicting Jesus on the cross without a crown of thorns, wearing a garment of royal purple, the nails transformed into golden points of light. His face is dignified without traces of suffering and looks straight ahead. Above the head is inscribed 'He is risen' in Arabic.³⁰ Thus de Chergé managed to smooth over, and almost eliminate, one of the most obvious differences between Christianity and Islam; the reality of the crucifixion. This, I argue, is taking a 'monastic methodology' too far. We know crucifixion was nothing like it was portrayed on Christian's icon, even allowing for the fact that icons can express realities that are 'true' on a deeper level than the obvious. This is a typical example of what Ross Reat has described as 'appropriational distortion', a 'pious distortion' whereby one appropriates the beliefs of others into one's own religion, what he calls the 'we have that too syndrome'.³¹ As will be discussed at some length in the thesis, the crucifixion is one of the major points of difference in understanding between Islam and Christianity, and the difference needs to be allowed to stand in its stark reality without compromise.

De Chergé's optimistic outlook on Muslim/Christian relations was grounded in his monastic life, which did not engage seriously enough with theology or the difficult issues of life as it is lived outside the monastery. As Christian Salenson has said:

There is a great affinity between monastic life and interreligious dialogue. The particular vocation of monks at once opens up and grounds dialogue, prevents it from drifting toward political shoals. Christian de Chergé was a monk to his core. The monastic life with its observances had a significant impact on the very content of his thought; it nourished it and gave it shape and expression.³²

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 135/6.

³¹ Ross Reat., *op.cit.*, p. 463.

³² Christian Salenson, *Christian de Chergé: A Theology of Hope*, translated by Nada Conic, Cistercian Publications, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2009, Ch.2, *The Conditions of Christian de Chergé's Theology*, pp 13-22, here at p. 15.

'Political shoals' however, whatever form they take, cannot be avoided as long as we are in this present life and it may be good, even necessary, to engage with them. De Chergé is an outstanding example of a practitioner of a 'monastic methodology', who will surely one day be recognised as a saint and a martyr. Yet, in this matter of sometimes seeming to bypass serious theological issues, and politics, Maurice Borrmans who taught De Chergé at the Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islam before he went to Algeria, has said:

Christian thought he could bring time forward, and burn the different stages to the end of time when men and women of sincere faith, whatever their religious tradition, will find themselves together as saints already conformed to the one Saint who is Jesus Christ. All this explains his constant will to bypass theological formulations.

But, concludes Borrmans:

Christians must also meet their Muslim partners in the city of men, and dialogue with their brothers [and sisters] in the human race, where 'men and women of dialogue are more than ever necessary, so that they will genuinely understand one another, respect one another generously...and work together free of prejudice and mistrust.'³³

In other words, they must grapple with their theological differences in the concrete world as it is, before a blissful eschatological state, as envisaged by de Chergé, can be attained. In order to do this it is helpful to stand back and complement an overly spiritual approach with a secular approach such as methodological agnosticism.

4 Methodological Agnosticism

As has been explained above, monastic life is a total institution which embraces every aspect of life. It is totally focused on 'the beyond' and spiritual realities, and as such it could possibly sometimes limit one's vision. Therefore it is best to complement it with a secular approach as recommended by Ninian Smart who has said that the two approaches, 'learning about religion and feeling the living power of religion' can and must go together.³⁴ Therefore it is useful to combine the monastic/faith approach with a degree of methodological agnosticism by which I attempt to 'bracket' my own faith, to stand outside it, as it were, in order to look at both Islam and Christianity

³³ *Christian de Chergé, Prieur de Thibirine: Lettres À Un Ami Fraternal*, France, Bayard Éditions 2015, *Témoignage: Un Étudiant Étrangement Motivé*, Pp. 7-28, here at p. 27.

³⁴ Ninian Smart, *op.cit.*, p. 160.

more objectively.³⁵ Traditional theology, which might include monastic theology, has scarcely tried to be pluralistic. It has not been interested, for instance, in the mysteries of Buddhism, Islam, or any other non-Christian religion, but has tended to focus almost exclusively on God, Scripture and the Church.³⁶ In order to enter into the thought and spirituality of another religion this is inadequate. To look at other religions from the insider perspective of one's own religion alone might be called the 'fideist' approach. The 'fideist' is one who contends that it is legitimate to hold a religious belief simply on the basis of faith assumptions.³⁷ If I were to embrace an exclusively fideist position, I would hold my own beliefs, concerning the nature of God, for instance, as absolutely right and denounce the Islamic perspective on the same issue as 'wrong'. Therefore methodological agnosticism is a very necessary complement to the faith approach. On this view, one can approach such an issue as the vitally important, potentially divisive issue of revelation with some detachment. According to Pembroke: 'It is not necessary to decide whether Allah actually revealed truth to Muhammad to observe that Muhammad's inner conviction that this took place resulted in a movement that has changed the course of human history.'³⁸

However I am aware that from my own faith perspective it is very difficult to obtain such detachment and pure objectivity. As Roger Arnaldez has said:

Wanting to 'enter into the thought of others' doubtless is a worthy project. But it must be me, myself, who enters, and enters from the outside. For, I can deprive myself of many things, but not of my own self in my personal being. I can overturn the 'idols of the tribe' and the 'idols of the forum', as Francis Bacon has said. I can make an effort to bracket my habits of thought, my tastes, my desires, my prejudices and those of my times. But something irreducible will always remain: my self.³⁹

Just as it is a 'worthy project' to try and enter into the thoughts of another person in order to develop some empathy on the human level, so it is of value on the level of interreligious

³⁵ In practice, throughout the thesis, I have found this approach very helpful, even necessary, as a complement to my strong, 'insider' Christian commitment.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 10-12.

³⁷ Neil Pembroke, *Outsiders and Insiders: Personal Reflections on Methodology in Studies in Religion at The University of Queensland, 1986-2010*, in *Crossroads*, Vol.V, UQ Centenary, 2011, pp. 123-126, here at p. 124.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Roger Arnaldez, *Three Messengers for One God*, translated by Gerald W. Schlabach, with Mary Louise Gude C.S.C and David. B. Burrell, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 1994, *Conclusion*, pp. 179-90, here at p. 185.

communication to attempt to enter into the thought of the other, including his/her religion. This is not only a courtesy to the other, but also enhances one's own understanding.

To be 'agnostic' in the way described above does not mean becoming a disbeliever, but simply to acknowledge that 'one is not in the position of having sufficient information to make a decision on matters of truth, for instance, the existence of God'.⁴⁰ God is real for Christians and Muslims from a faith perspective, but we have to acknowledge we cannot prove his existence beyond any shadow of doubt, and in recognition of this the approach of methodological agnosticism must include 'agnosticism about the existence or otherwise of the main *foci* [objects of belief] of the belief system in question.'⁴¹

In practice, therefore, I remain a committed believer, but try as far as I am able, at least some of the time, to 'bracket' my faith. In adopting a reflexive stance, which I describe below, I acknowledge that this is only partially possible.

5 Reflexivity

I modify, therefore, both the above approaches, that is, of monasticism and methodological agnosticism, with some consideration of reflexivity, as being a factor in any research which cannot be ignored. Reflexivity is a system described by McCutcheon as:

a way of looking at the world which emphasizes differences over rules and sameness; it stresses the metaphoric and the slippery over rules and sameness; it stresses the metaphoric and slippery nature of language over the modernist, objective, factual understanding of how communication proceeds; it addresses the manner in which meaning is not something possessed in a word, an action, or an object as much as it is the product of a series of relations which comprise the word or the object.⁴²

In adopting a reflexive approach I recognise that '[w]e are all in the text; there is no way out and there is no position of luxurious all-knowing or neutral narration'.⁴³ Therefore all my research is in a sense autobiographical, revealing of my background and motives, from the choice of the topic itself, the individual converts I have chosen to study, the topics I have ignored and those on which I

⁴⁰ *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion, a Reader*, Edited by Russel T. McCutcheon, London, Continuum, 1999, this edition 2005, *General Introduction* by the Editor, p1-22, here at p7

⁴¹ Ninian Smart, *op.cit.*, from Ch.3, *The Nature of Phenomenological Objects of Religion*, p. 54.

⁴² McCutcheon, *op.cit.*, p. 9.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

have chosen to elaborate, my general attitude to the situation of the converts etc. Sometimes I might wish to hide my committed, insider Christian identity, but I recognise that it would manifest itself however much I tried to disguise it. I am very much in my own work from the first to the last letter. McCutcheon expresses this very well, when he says:

Researcher and subject alike are both seen to be enmeshed in the human situation, making this much sought after neutrality a mere illusion. The conclusion in this case is that the experiences that we scholars are able to study are none other than our own. According to this option, all scholarship has an autobiographical aspect which is often overlooked or sometimes outright ignored and disguised.⁴⁴

With the approach of methodological agnosticism described above, I can attempt to bracket my Christianity in order to see Islam more objectively. This means in practice, for instance, that I can allow one of my subjects, Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, to make some quite negative comments about Islam after his conversion, without feeling the need to apologise for him or justify his views from my Christian perspective. From my monastic/Christian perspective, I would rather smooth over such comments, perhaps by trying to find similar attitudes in Christianity (appropriational distortion), or some other such device to smooth over the differences which I may feel uncomfortable about.⁴⁵ But when I take a reflexive stance it means I fully recognise my own bias, and the extent to which it influences, even subconsciously, the choice of what I write and how I express my views. For instance in the conversion accounts that follow (Chs. 4 and 5), most readers could ascertain that I am a committed Christian. All my sympathies are with the convert and his struggles as he tries to come to terms with a cultural environment with which he is unfamiliar, combined with rejection by family, friends and the governments of their respective homelands. A Muslim, or a non-believer, would doubtless write the accounts very differently. In conclusion I agree with the proposition that in a 'highly charged subject like religion, one needs to be more aware, not less aware, of the impossible goal of pure objectivity'.⁴⁶ In the course of the thesis, as I look at the lives and writings of Hassan Barnaba Dehqani-Tafti and Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, my monastic

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 8/9.

⁴⁵ See Ch.7 of thesis.

⁴⁶ Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Other People's Myths*, in McCutcheon, *op.cit.*, Pp.331-349, here at p. 342.

methodology, with some admixture of agnosticism and reflexivity will be evident.

6. Conclusion

Finally, I must make clear that despite some concentration on doctrinal differences which can be sensitive, even painful, the intention of my research is to understand Islam better, not to criticise in a polemical way, still less to draw others to my own point of view and religious allegiance. And so I allow the differences to stand in their stark and uncompromising reality, uniting them in myself on a deeper level which is wordless and beyond reason.

Chapter Three which follows precedes the biographical accounts and deals with the subject of conversion as a phenomenon from a broad, sociological/religious perspective, before I discuss the conversion stories from my own insider Christian perspective in Chapters Four and Five.

CHAPTER 3

CONVERSION: AN EXPLORATION OF ITS SACRED AND SECULAR ASPECTS

1 Introduction

Conversion is a very complex area of study which can be approached from many different angles. The thesis is limited for the most part to the study of conversion from Islam to Christianity and issues which arise from that, especially theological issues which separate the two faiths, but a deeper understanding of Muslim/Christian relations in general may perhaps be obtained by considering some secular approaches to conversion. As Sebastian Kim has said: 'Any study of conversion needs to consider what these disciplines have to say.'¹ And further, 'One cannot understand any religious phenomenon without considering its social and anthropological environment, and conversion is no exception.'² Lewis Rambo, whose work will be considered later, would take the same approach. Moreover there is today, he claims, a 'renewed interest in the study of conversion' because of 'the rise of new religious movements, the resurgence of "born again" evangelical Christianity, the rapid spread of the charismatic movement, and other forms of dramatic religious manifestations.'³ Rambo's Bibliography of conversion studies, which he does not claim is exhaustive, lists the entries under various categories: the anthropological, sociological, historical, psychological, psychoanalytic and finally the theological.

This 'exploration', inevitably limited in scope, begins by asking why a secular approach to religion in general, and conversion studies in particular, which many theologians would normally think of solely from a religious perspective, is necessary at all. It begins by examining the very secular approach of the anthropologist Robin Horton on conversion to Islam and Christianity in Africa. The focus then turns to Lewis Rambo, whose work helps to unravel the complexities of conversion studies, while throwing some light on the reason why the religious approach can

¹ Sebastian Kim, *Understanding Religious Conversion: A Study of Theological, Anthropological and Psychological Perspectives*, Ch.37, pp. 543-564 in *Missiology for the 21st Century*, Edited by Roger Hedlund and Joshua Bhakiaraj, Delhi, ISPCK 2004, here at p. 543.

² *Ibid.* p. 555.

³ Lewis R. Rambo, *Bibliography: Current Research on Religious Conversion*, in *Religious Studies Review*, Vol.8, No.2, April 1982, pp. 146-159, here at p. 146.

sometimes be rather dismissive of the secular approach. Then psychological issues are addressed, followed by some considerations from the theological perspective, and finally we turn to the major topic of this thesis, conversion from Islam to Christianity, which will include a brief biography of Mulla-Zadé, the Turkish convert who helped Abd-el-Jalil through his own conversion difficulties.

2 Is the secular /sociological approach really necessary?

This approach may be highly desirable, even necessary, but in certain cases its value can be questioned, and from a religious perspective can seem reductionist and of little value. Lewis Rambo has said that missiologists, for instance, who are 'concerned primarily with the religious or spiritual dimensions of conversion, are frequently critical of secular academics, whom they see, not unjustly, as tending to minimise religious factors.'⁴

However, there are two important reasons why the religious understanding of conversion must, to some extent, enter into conversation with secular disciplines such as the social sciences and psychology. The first of these concerns the two dimensional nature of the human being, who, according to the Hebrew/Christian understanding, is composed of both body and spirit (soul), and was created in the image of God (Gen.1:27). And so 'Western society, that used to be called Christian, is based upon the idea that our ancestors had of what man is.'⁵ A secular approach is necessary first of all because this version of the nature of man is no longer universally acknowledged.

Around this basic idea of the nature of the human person derived from revelation, our Christian/Western culture developed. All that is connected with the physical side of human nature – broadly defined as culture, might be thought of as the domain of the social sciences, whilst the spiritual is more the concern of theology. But what *is* this 'culture'- does it have a spiritual aspect, and does it still exist today in the Christian/Western form described above? Culture, a concept not easily defined, might be described loosely as the domain, the *milieu*, in which sociologists and

⁴ Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Yale University Press, 1993, *Preface*, p. xi.

⁵ F.J. Sheed, *Society and Sanity*, Sheed & Ward, London 1953, Ch.1 *Man Essential*, pp. 15-29, here at p. 15. The human person is also described in this chapter as an eternal spirit 'meant for eternal union with God', but he also 'damaged himself', and is 'redeemed by Christ' (*ibid.* p. 15).

anthropologists work. It has a cluster of meanings, and varies in its manifestations throughout the world. One description of it compares it to 'an ocean, surrounding us as water a fish... it forms our mind-sets and heart-sets and gives us our typical way of interpreting our lives.'⁶ It may appear today that the Christian culture described above, around which our Western/European society has grown, no longer exists, but arguably the roots are still there. As Paul Gallagher has said:

Thirty years ago many sociologists argued confidently about an 'irreversible secularization', predicting that religion would inevitably decline in influence and become something socially marginal. More recently we have heard about the 'return of religion', the rise of fundamentalism, the claims of faith within the public sphere, the multiplying of new religious movements. These seemingly contrary phenomena are provoked by the fragmentations, the malnutritions, and the rootless loneliness of a dominantly secular culture.⁷

These considerations lead to the second reason, closely related to the first, why it is important to approach conversion from a secular as well as a religious perspective. This is the fact that many people today do not believe that God exists at all, nor in any kind of spiritual life. As John Smith has said:

The widespread scepticism that exists concerning the possibility of truth in religion, [means that] theological answers are, for most people, not answers at all, but new questions and problems. This means that theological interpretations can make their impact on the modern scene only in dialectic with other alternatives. This dialectic is a more arduous undertaking than is supposed by those who assume a ready-made religious truth and then look about for an accepted language in which to express it.⁸

Moreover, because conversion, and indeed everything concerning religion, is related in some way to God, the world and people, it 'is logically related to secular knowledge, to knowledge gained from sources other than the revealed tradition.'⁹ Robin Horton's approach, described below, is very secular.

3 Robin Horton: Conversion to Islam and Christianity in Africa

In the 1970's Robin Horton did much anthropological research on the phenomenon of

⁶ Michael Paul Gallagher SJ, *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture*, London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997 (reprinted 1997 and 1999). See *Introduction: Culture as Cinderella*, pp. 1-9, here at p. 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁸ Walter E. Conn, Ph.D, (Ed.), *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation*, New York, Alba House, 1978, See John E. Smith, *The Concept of Conversion*, pp. 51-73. Here at p. 58. At the time of writing Professor Smith taught philosophy of religion at Yale University.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

conversion from traditional religions in Nigeria to Islam and Christianity.¹⁰ He addresses ‘the way in which culture impedes and/or facilitates the transition from one religious group to another.’¹¹ He concludes, in a nutshell, that rather than from genuine religious motives, ‘indigenous groups were attracted to the new religions according to their own needs vis-à-vis their own situation.’¹² Horton’s ideas were based on his understanding of traditional African cosmology, which he described as:

a system of ideas about unobservable personal beings whose activities are alleged to underpin the events of the ordinary, everyday world. Applied to this world, the system enables its users to see identities of process underlying apparent diversity, and to chart causal regularities underlying apparent anomaly. In short, it provides an impressive instrument for explanations, predictions, and control.¹³

Within this system, Horton considers that ‘Islam and Christianity were merely catalysts’ to conversion, that is, ‘stimulators and accelerators of changes that were “in the air” anyway.’¹⁴ He further explains that there were two layers in the traditional cosmology, these being the small, local spirits, and an ‘indigenous supreme being.’¹⁵ It was observed that the members of the local communities who were more mobile, less rooted to their immediate environment, such as traders, were more aware of a supreme being who operates everywhere. Christian missionaries came along when the local tribes were progressing towards modernity and a broader view of life than their local concerns anyway, and in this situation the missionaries identified the African ‘supreme being’ with the ‘Christian God’ and Christianity as the ‘true’ way of contacting this being.¹⁶ Horton seems to be saying that the African convert has not undergone a genuine conversion to Christianity (or Islam, as the case may be), but has merely ‘accepted change and development in his concept of the supreme being.’¹⁷ I would argue that the missionaries were doing no more than St Paul did when he preached the gospel in the city of Athens. He noticed among their sacred monuments an altar

¹⁰ For an account of his theory see Robin Horton, *African Conversion*, in *Africa, Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol.XLI, No.1, April 1971, pp. 85-108.

¹¹ Lewis Rambo, *Bibliography*, *op.cit.*, p. 146.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Horton, *African Conversion*, *op.cit.*, p. 101.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

inscribed 'To the Unknown God', and began his speech in the Areopagus with the words: 'The unknown God you revere is the one I preach to you.'¹⁸ The 'supreme being' of the African tribes bears comparison with the 'unknown god' of the Athenians.

Horton's anthropological research may be impressive, but he nevertheless received severe criticism from scholars who approached conversion from a religious perspective. His chief critic was the Islamist Humphrey Fisher, who claimed that his theory 'failed to make sense of the African response to Islam' in that it had not sufficiently taken into account the religious aspects of conversion.¹⁹ In two subsequent journal articles, Horton goes to great lengths to respond to these criticisms, but does not change his position that 'given a marked weakening of microcosmic boundaries, some of the principal developments associated with "conversion" commonly did take place even in the absence of significant influence from either Islam or Christianity.'²⁰ Fisher's objections were shared by a number of Christian scholars, whom Horton rather disparagingly called 'The Devout Opposition', a label which he believed served to describe both their 'strong Christian commitment and their opposition to causal explanations of religious belief and behaviour.'²¹ Horton's further comments show the wide gap and lack of understanding between the religious and the sociological perspectives on conversion. He stands accused by Victor Turner of 'trying to deny the spiritual world', whereas Christians are convinced that 'all beliefs in a spiritual reality, whether monotheistic or polytheistic, are at least approximations to the truth.'²²

Robin Horton's work has undoubtedly thrown light on some aspects of the conversion process in Africa, but it is less than adequate from the religious perspective. Moreover his somewhat dogmatic approach, in that he would not admit the possibility of a religious element in the conversions he describes, did not endear him to religious scholars. It is a fact that the most

¹⁸ *Acts of the Apostles*, Ch.17:16-34. This is not from Horton.

¹⁹ Robin Horton, *On the Rationality of Conversion*, Part 1, *Africa*, Vol.45, No.3, 1975, p. 234. We are referred to Fisher's work in the same *Africa* journal: *Conversion Reconsidered: Some Historical Aspects of Religious Conversion in Black Africa*, 1973, No.1, pp. 27-40.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, in *Africa*, *op.cit.*, p. 234.

²¹ *On the Rationality of Conversion*, Part II, *Africa*, Vol.45, Part 4, 1975, pp. 375-399, here at p. 396.

²² *Ibid.* The reference to Victor Turner is from *The Drums of Affliction*, London 1968.

atheistic of researches should be able to 'bracket' his or her atheism and recognise that religious experiences and realities may be genuine. Such an approach in this case might have allowed the value of his research to find more appreciation among religious scholars. This issue will be addressed further in the next section.

4 Lewis R. Rambo: Understanding Religious Conversion ²³

Lewis Rambo, from his particular religious background, is able to appreciate and demonstrate the value of a multi-disciplinary approach which includes both the sacred and the secular. His main interest in the topic of conversion developed from his observation that in recent times there has been, 'an amazing resurgence of religious vitality, both in the United States and in many other parts of the world.'²⁴ There is a proliferation of sects and new movements of all descriptions, as well as a resurgence of Islam and Christianity in some parts of the world. 'These developments', says Rambo, 'have stimulated scholars to re-examine the nature of the conversion process.'²⁵ From his own religious perspective, coloured by his 'sectarian' past, he considers that 'genuine' conversion is a 'total transformation of the person by the power of God' which, however, 'occurs through the mediation of social, cultural, personal and religious forces'.²⁶ Although these forces will vary in importance in each case, and also more than likely in bias according to the background of the researcher, Rambo acknowledges that 'no model can encompass the whole of reality', but nevertheless any study of conversion must include, some insight from 'cultural, social, personal and religious systems.'²⁷

Rambo's own 'sectarian' past, which was very narrow and circumscribed, may go some way towards explaining his need to explore conversion from wider and more varied perspectives. Brought up in Mexico in a religious sect called 'The Church of Christ', he was taught that salvation was hard work, and could only be obtained by 'adopting a self-judgement of evil and confessing our

²³ This is the title of the book here under consideration: Lewis R Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Yale University Press, 1993. The author is a professor of the psychology of religion.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

pervasive and pernicious sins.’²⁸ There was very little joy and peace – or if there were it was ‘secondary or irrelevant’.²⁹ It happened that he had friends in the same small town community, who may have been Sothern Baptists or Methodists, whom he was taught were ‘lost’ because ‘they proclaimed an “easy” gospel of merely believing in Jesus and inviting him into their hearts’. But they [the Church of Christ] believed that they had THE TRUTH’ and could prove it’.³⁰ He acknowledges that his consciousness was shaped by his unusual religious upbringing ‘in profound ways’.³¹ And so he was led to the human sciences because they focused on ‘empathy, personal experience, and the complexity of the human predicament.’³² Empathy he describes as ‘the authentic desire and ability to get into another person’s skin.’³³ With regard to the purely religious approach, which theologians consider to be essential and all other approaches ‘reductionist’ and subordinate to it, he says:

Religion is the sacred – the encounter with the holy that, according to many religions, constitutes both the source and goal of conversion. Religious people affirm that the purpose of conversion is to bring people into relationship with the divine and provide them with a new sense of meaning and purpose. Theologians consider this dimension absolutely essential to the whole process of human transformation; other factors are subordinate to it.³⁴

Because of this strong bias, it is all the more important for theologians to be open to other approaches. In this regard he says, ‘there is value to the researcher in *bracketing* the theological dimensions in order to uncover the social and personal dynamics of conversion.’³⁵ Likewise a non-believer should be able to enter into the religious process for, ‘[t]aking religion seriously does not require ‘belief’, but it does imply ‘respect’ for the fact that conversion is a ‘religious’ process, involving an elaborate array of forces, ideas, institutions, rituals, myths, and symbols.’³⁶

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

³² *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p11, taken from William R. Garrett *Troublesome Transcendence: The Supernatural in the Scientific Study of Religion*, in *Sociological Analysis* 35 (1974): pp. 167-80.

4.1 The Sequential Stage Model

The 'sequential stage model' is Rambo's unique contribution to the complex area of conversion studies. Through this method he has attempted to bring some kind of order to the many studies feeding into the themes he has chosen, and therefore his insights will occasionally be referred to in the conversion studies that follow later in the thesis.

Rambo entered the world of conversion studies from the sociological perspective by reading all the relevant literature, attending conferences, and meeting people, including converts. When he had gathered all the information he could he realised what a complex area of study he had embarked upon. He compared it to 'a metropolitan train yard crowded with separate tracks that ran parallel to each other, where each individual train had its own assigned track and never crossed over to another.'³⁷ Rambo's own approach, therefore, recognises this complexity by breaking up the conversion process into several key stages, where various descriptions from a number of disciplines would intersect and feed into each other at these key points. His 'sequential stage model', as he calls it, contains the following 'modes': context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences.³⁸

'Context', the first item, he describes as 'the total environment in which conversion transpires' which 'embraces the political, social, economic and religious domains.'³⁹ There are also to be taken into account 'subjective, internal motivations, experiences and aspirations' so that 'the content [context] is the integration of both the superstructure and infrastructure of conversion.'⁴⁰

'Crisis', the second 'mode', describes the troubled state that generally precedes conversion in some form; this could be 'religious, political, psychological, or cultural.'⁴¹ Scholars have been divided as to whether the convert is active or passive in this stage, but according to Rambo 'it is not

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

either/or but rather a both/and factor, with a multitude of variations along the spectrum.⁴² There are many different types of disorientation and crisis. Rambo has categorised these into two basic types, that is: 'those which call into question one's fundamental orientation to life' and 'crises which in themselves are rather mild but are the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back.'⁴³ However no stress, tension, or crisis is enough to explain conversion, considers Rambo, but may be a 'catalyst... an initiator of the process of conversion.' Other catalysts could be such things as a near death experience, or recovery from a severe illness.⁴⁴ Sometimes it can be a mystical experience, as in the case, for instance, of Saul of Tarsus, who seemed to have been struck down by such an experience; whatever happened to him, it 'convinced him' declares Rambo, 'that his commitment to persecution was untenable', and he became 'the leading proclaimer of Christianity.'⁴⁵ From a theological perspective it is not difficult to see God at work in all the above states of 'crisis' for, as will be argued later, there is something inherent in human nature that seeks transcendence and is therefore open to mystical experience, but the sociological perspective would often rather deny this. According to Rambo:

Some would argue, especially from a theological point of view, that human beings are motivated to seek beyond themselves for meaning and purpose. Many people desire to experience God in a way which will enrich and expand their lives. Social scientists rarely admit such positive motivations for conversion, tending to see them as rationalizations for 'deeper' motivations, (often pathological), that are being masked by religious ideas.⁴⁶

Psychological literature, similarly, tends to take the view that crisis 'implies debility, a breakdown', from which perspective 'the motivation to convert derives from a deficiency generated out of fear, loneliness, or desperation' and the conversion is no more than 'an adaptive mechanism' to resolve these problems.⁴⁷

The next stage model is called the 'Quest', which is described as 'a process of building

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 48.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 48/9. See also below, the section of conversion from Islam to Christianity where mystical experiences are not uncommon. Abd-el-Jalil compares his experience to that of St Paul (See Ch.5 of thesis).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50/1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 52/3. Such psychological issues will be addressed in more detail below.

meaning... the assumption that people seek to maximise meaning and purpose in life, to erase ignorance, and to resolve inconsistency'.⁴⁸ In crisis conditions this becomes a compelling issue, although it is ongoing throughout the whole of life. Here St Augustine, one of the most famous converts to Christianity, is given as an example. Augustine's quest took him from North Africa, through various religious and philosophical traditions, till he finally embraced the Roman Catholic Church. He was very active in his conversion process, and this quality of active seeking, says Rambo, should be emphasised, because 'for too long, converts have been viewed as primarily passive.'⁴⁹ Cults of various kinds, for instance, may use 'manipulative and deceptive strategies to seduce people into involvement.'⁵⁰

The quest usually results in 'Encounter', which is the next stage. This is usually initiated by an 'advocate' - the term used for the person, whether religious or otherwise, who may initiate a conversion process. Many of these 'advocates' are religious missionaries, thousands of whom are working throughout the world at any given time for the explicit purpose of making converts.⁵¹ Throughout history there have been many missionary enterprises - 'complex organisations that were important' for instance 'to European and American colonial endeavours'.⁵² This was so much the case that they were often seen as 'uncritical supporters of colonial rule.'⁵³ Part of this process, though given a separate category in Rambo's scheme, is 'interaction', which involves a whole spectrum of relationships between the 'advocate' and the potential convert. This may involve a period of 'encapsulation', a withdrawal period from a former life which gives the convert a certain space while he/she learns 'new relationships, rituals, rhetoric and rules.'⁵⁴

The above stages culminate in 'Commitment', which is 'the fulcrum of the conversion

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ See p. 66. Rambo gives a fairly comprehensive list, which includes Buddhist and Muslim missionaries as well as Christian.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 102/3

process', usually sealed with a public commitment.⁵⁵ The notion of 'surrender' is important here. This is the 'inner process of commitment and is one of the most difficult aspects of conversion to understand.'⁵⁶ This is meant presumably from the sociological perspective, but from the religious perspective, or from the convert's own perspective, it may be '*the* turning point away from the old life and the beginning of a new life... produced by the power of God's grace', concerning which 'outsiders may be perplexed' but for insiders it is 'absolutely essential to a new life'.⁵⁷

The final stage in Rambo's scheme comes under the heading 'Consequences'. The consequences of any conversion are 'complex and multifaceted', and we are given five possible approaches to be taken into account, these being, '[t]he role of personal bias, general observations, in-depth looks at socio-cultural and historical consequences, psychological consequences and theological consequences.'⁵⁸

Thus many disciplines can intersect and feed into each other at these key points so that the metaphorical railway tracks, in the very descriptive image of the metropolitan railway yard given by Rambo above, constantly cross over and feed into one another. He also compares each of these individual disciplines, taken by themselves, to the fable of ten blind people who go to 'see' an elephant.⁵⁹ The various disciplines approaching conversion, he says, could be compared to 'sighted people entering through separate doors into a dark room – one barely large enough to contain the elephant – and each trying to describe the beast discovered with only a penlight to see by'.⁶⁰ Therefore, it must be concluded, each discipline should have great respect for different perspectives, realising that one view, be it sociological, anthropological, psychological or theological, can never give the whole picture, or, according to Rambo's image, 'see the whole animal'.⁶¹

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16. He does not give the provenance of this fable.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

4.2 A closer look at 'Consequences'

As described above, after any individual piece of research has been completed, there would normally follow a process of interpretation and explanation of the data. Bearing in mind the above considerations, this should be 'tentative, respectful and subtle'.⁶² The social sciences, Rambo claims, tend to be more 'analytical, critical, and reductionist' than humanistic models, which would include religious studies, historical, and theological approaches.⁶³ He goes so far as to say that 'scientific understanding of conversion is merely a human attempt to comprehend a phenomenon that is an encounter between a mysterious God and an individual of vast potential, perversity, and extraordinary complexity'.⁶⁴ Therefore all approaches, not just the theological, are valid and necessary, and can throw some light, albeit in all cases limited, on to a very complex phenomenon.

In his final chapter on 'consequences', one aspect Rambo draws attention to is the importance of knowing the bias of the researcher/author in question. Whatever this bias may be, he says, should be made 'as explicit as possible' because 'assessments of any kind proceed from a particular perspective in which values and philosophies are present, either explicitly or implicitly.'⁶⁵

Rambo himself, because he makes clear his religious upbringing and current interest in the social sciences, seems to be relatively unbiased, open to what all disciplines have to say, and thereby helps one to have a similarly unbiased appreciation of the variety and richness of different approaches, whether sacred or secular. One might surmise that his own *penchant* for in-depth study of the social sciences, especially psychology, grew out of his very constricted religious background, for, in a footnote, he states:

Few people, especially secular intellectuals, wish to be consciously aware of constant subjection to the authority of a superior being, even a god. I see my own reservations about an honest appraisal of the religious domain emerge when I am with a convert who reports a powerful experience of God and I sense that experience, if true, might have a powerful determining influence on me. Something in me would rather continue flight from God, and live in the relatively tame and safe world of the intellectual who has the illusion of control.⁶⁶

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁶⁶ Rambo, *op.cit.*, footnote 8, p. 178/9.

Finally, in his own assessment of conversion, having approached it from many perspectives, Rambo captures the fact that ultimately it is a mystery, and deeply paradoxical:

Conversion is paradoxical. It is elusive. It is inclusive. It destroys and it saves. Conversion is sudden and it is gradual. It is created totally by the action of God, and it is created totally by the action of humans. Conversion is personal and communal, private and public. It is both passive and active. It is a retreat from the world. It is resolution of conflict and an empowerment to go into the world and to confront, if not create, conflict. Conversion is an event and a process. It is an ending and a beginning. It is final and open-ended. Conversion leaves us devastated and transformed.⁶⁷

5 Psychological perspectives

The psychological approach to conversion perhaps comes closest to the theological/religious in that it is dealing with the individual experience of the convert, rather than the wider issues of culture, social context etc. but that is as far as it goes. What is essential for a theological/religious understanding ; a personal relationship with God who acts in the person's life, is usually excluded from the psychological perspective. In this regard the question will be asked here: is the experience from God or does it have a human/secular explanation, in which case God is not involved at all? Lewis Rambo, as discussed above, makes the point that each discipline has its own bias, and is not always open to understanding other points of view. The psychological approach's particular bias is that it tends to be vigilant for pathology, as for example, as observed by Rambo: 'Most psychological evaluations of conversion assess the outcome as an inadequate coping with resolution of guilt, of hostility, and so forth.'⁶⁸ Rambo does not disagree with this negative portrayal, but simply says that 'the person making the assessment must acknowledge that his or her values may have an impact on the interpretation of the data.'⁶⁹ Conversion is a 'profound psychological experience', whatever its cause, and as such it has drawn psychologists of religion to study it in a scientific way, because it is 'an observable, behavioural phenomenon... which can be spoken of in both a sacred and a secular manner.'⁷⁰ Wayne E. Oates, who at the time of writing taught psychology of religion at the Southern

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 142/3.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁷⁰ Wayne E. Oates, *Conversion: Sacred and Secular*, in *Conn. Conversion, op.cit.*, pp. 149-168, here at p. 149.

Baptist Theological Seminary, USA, observed, however, 'that this potentially religious experience is referred to in increasingly secular manners.'⁷¹ We will now look briefly at two important psychological studies, before concluding with some reflections from perhaps the greatest psychologist of our times, Carl Gustav Jung.

5.1 Edwin Starbuck (1886-1947)

One of the earliest psychological studies of religious phenomena to make use of a scientific method of enquiry was a study of conversion. For such a topic strictly experimental methods obviously cannot be used, but Starbuck, at the end of the nineteenth century, did it by what were considered at that time 'somewhat novel methods'.⁷² This consisted in 'sending out to a number of people a typed set of questions and then classifying their answers and subjecting them to a process of numerical analysis.'⁷³ His results seemed to emphasise that conversion was mostly an adolescent phenomenon. There are all sorts of reasons for this, one of the major ones being that 'underlying adolescent conversion is the system of conflicts which result from the emergence into consciousness of the impulses connected with the sex instinct.'⁷⁴ This type of conversion is characterised by 'exaggeration of pre-conversion sinfulness and of post-conversion virtue.'⁷⁵ However, Robert Thouless points out that these converts were 'products of the attitude towards sexuality of their time', but nevertheless, 'adolescence will remain a time of stress however much attitudes may change.'⁷⁶ Wayne Oates, for his part, considered that Starbuck 'overemphasised conversion with adolescence.', whereas in fact, according to Carl Jung, 'the heavier crises of faith, often resulting in psychological illness, occur after the age of thirty five.'⁷⁷ It is not really important for the present discussion when or how conversion takes place, but is it the work of God in a person's life, or merely personality/psychological issues working themselves out? Edwin Starbuck certainly sees divine

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Robert H. Thouless, *The Psychology of Conversion*, in Conn, *op.cit.*, pp. 137-147, here at p. 139.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁷⁷ Wayne. E. Oates, in Conn, *op.cit.*, p. 154.

forces at work: 'The psychology of religion', he says, 'sees in the scattered facts of religious experience an evidence that spiritual forces are at work... religion is a real fact of human experience and develops according to law.'⁷⁸

5.2 William James (1842-1910)

William James was a prominent American psychologist and philosopher. He knew and valued the work of Edwin Starbuck, despite the fact that he believed his method to be flawed, which undoubtedly it was by today's standards.⁷⁹ James relied heavily on Starbuck's material, however, but his interpretation of the data differed. It seems he used 'anonymously his own, "case", his severe depression and its "conversion" into creative energy', which did not happen when he was a teenager.⁸⁰ This was a 'secular' conversion experience.

Importantly, therefore, he differs from Starbuck in that he does not see the need to attribute divine intervention to 'religious' conversion. In his examination of conversion experiences, whether 'sudden' or 'gradual', occurring in youth or at a later age, he concluded that the difference between them was 'not radical'.⁸¹ The differences could be attributed to subconscious workings of the mind, of which little was known at that time. As James maintains:

I cannot but think that the most important step forward that has occurred in psychology since I have been a student of the science is the discovery, first made in 1886, that, in certain subjects at least, there is not only the consciousness of the ordinary field, with its usual center and margin, but an addition thereto, in the shape of a set of memories, thoughts and feelings which are extra-marginal and outside of the primary consciousness altogether, but yet must be classed as conscious facts of some sort, able to reveal their presence by unmistakable signs... this discovery has revealed to us an entirely unsuspected peculiarity in the constitution of human nature.⁸²

James does not exclude the possibility of a spiritual life *after* the process of conversion, but in the actual experience itself, which culminates in self-surrender, there is no difference between an

⁷⁸ Edwin Starbuck. *The Psychology of Religion*, New York: The Walter Scott Publishing, 1914, p16., quoted by Kim in *Understanding Religious Conversion: A Study of Theological, Anthropological, and Psychological Perspectives*. P. 559.

⁷⁹ See Robert Thouless, in Conn, *op.cit.*, p. 140/1. For instance, he did not consider how far the response was determined by the questions asked, nor did he have an unbiased sample.

⁸⁰ Seward Hiltner, *Toward a Theology of Conversion in the Light of Psychology*, in Conn, *op.cit.*, pp. 179-190, here at p. 180.. Professor Hiltner taught Theology and Personality at Princeton Theological Seminary.

⁸¹ William James, *The Divided Self and Conversion*, in Conn, *op.cit.*, pp. 121-136, here at p. 127.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 133/4.

experience that is sudden and one that is gradual. There is not 'the presence of divine miracle in one and of something less divine in that of the other, but rather a simple psychological process.'⁸³

Therefore, James, perhaps in the light of his own 'conversion' from depression to creative activity, where seemingly God was not involved at all, tended to side with a secular interpretation of the phenomenon, in accordance with his psychological training. A certain amount of confusion remains however, for according to Wayne Oates, 'James presupposes that conversion *may or may not* be the result of "direct divine operation"'.⁸⁴

This kind of 'secular' thinking was developed and given greater precision by Sigmund Freud, who denied all divine involvement, and drew attention to 'an active process of *repression* by which 'that which is painful or incompatible with the main stream of consciousness is banished into a region called the *unconscious* from where it may influence behaviour or conscious processes of thought'.⁸⁵ To balance this attitude we must look briefly at Carl Jung, who at the beginning of his career collaborated with Freud, but later strongly disagreed with him, and eventually broke away completely.

5.3 Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961)

Carl Jung is the father of psychoanalysis, and developed our understanding of the subconscious in very significant ways, such as the understanding of the archetypes of the collective unconscious, and the male and female principle (animus and anima), present in everyone, regardless of gender. In a conversation he had with Freud, it is clear that religion is perhaps the main item that divides these two great men. They were discussing neurosis, a 'mental disease embracing the psychological mechanism in its totality', of which there may be multiple causes but according to Freud, was caused "exclusively" by sexuality, Jung reports:

I can still recall vividly how Freud said to me: My dear Jung, promise me never to abandon the sexual theory. This is the most essential thing of all. You see, we must make a dogma of it, an unshakeable bulwark.... I was bewildered and embarrassed. One thing was clear: Freud who has always made much of his irreligiosity, had now constructed a dogma; or

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 152, italics mine.

⁸⁵ Robert Thouless, in Conn, *op.cit.*, p. 139.

rather, in the place of a jealous God whom he had lost, he had substituted another compelling image, that of sexuality.⁸⁶

By contrast, Jung's research convinced him that there is a 'religious function' in man (and woman) that 'influences him in its way as powerfully as do the instincts of sexuality and aggression'.⁸⁷ Frieda Fordham believed that in Jung's time (and the same could be said today) people often viewed religion as a 'childish weakness' or 'an escape from reality', whereas according to Jung, every person has 'a natural religious function' and one's 'psychic health and stability depend on the proper expression of this.'⁸⁸ We can easily recognise this religious instinct in primitive man, Fordham continues, because we can observe that he was as much 'occupied with the expression of this function – the forming of symbols and the building up of a religion' as he was with 'tilling the earth, hunting, fishing.'⁸⁹ Today, this religious instinct may be less observable, even denied, but according to Jung, as described by Fordham:

In spite of the modern attitude of denigration, men and women are just as naturally religious as ever they were. Much, however, of the energy that formerly flowed into ritual and religious observance now finds expression in political creeds, or is frittered away in peculiar cults, or attached to something extraneous like the pursuit of knowledge. 'A scientist has no creed', says William James, 'but his temper is devout', while Julian Huxley suggests in all seriousness that we should have a religion based on evolution... evolutionary humanism.'⁹⁰

This 'god-image' which we all possess, is one of the archetypes and part of the collective unconscious of humankind. Unfortunately even religious people may have lost some of the mystery and awesome strength of this archetype. For sometimes 'creed and ritual have become so elaborated and refined that they no longer express the psychic state of the ordinary man, and religion has congealed into externals and formalities.'⁹¹ In today's world these remarks may still

⁸⁶ From C.J Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p. 150/1, quoted by Antonio Moreno, *Jung, Gods & Modern Man*, first published USA, Notre Dame Press 1970, this edition UK, SPCK 1974. Ch 7, *Jung's Ideas on Neurosis*, pp. 185-215, here at p. 186.

⁸⁷ Frieda Fordham, *An Introduction to Jung's Psychology*, UK, Penguin Books, first published, 1973, reprinted several times, Ch.4 *Religion and the Individuation Process*, pp. 69-83, here at p. 70. This book was written in Jung's lifetime by a close associate, and has his personal recommendation and *Imprimatur*. See *Editorial Note* by G.A. Mace, p. 9.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 70. The term 'evolutionary humanism' is taken by the author from the *Listener*, Nov. 1951, which records a series of Huxley's radio talks entitled *The process of Evolution*.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

have relevance. As Jung has said: 'It is the primary task of all education (of adults) to convey the archetype of the God-image, or its emanations and effects, to the conscious mind.'⁹²

This observation is a good introduction to the theological approach to conversion, which draws into sharper relief the 'archetype of the God-image'.

6. A Theological/Religious Approach

Conversion is a fundamental and central concept in Christianity, difficult to distinguish from a host of other concepts, such as 'faith (*fides qua*), hope, love, contrition, metanoia, justification, redemption.'⁹³ At root it is a call from God (this point is relevant in light of the above secular considerations), a response to the divine initiative. It takes many forms, both sacred and secular, but from the theological perspective, it springs from the fact that 'the desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself.'⁹⁴ This confirms Jung's insight of the 'religious function' to be found in every individual man and woman. Faith, described by Rahner above as 'difficult to distinguish from conversion', 'is man's response to God, who reveals himself and gives himself to man, at the same time bringing man a superabundant light as he searches for the ultimate meaning of his life.'⁹⁵ Conversion, then, is first and foremost a work of the grace of God who makes our hearts return to him. The quote given in the Catechism illustrates this point: 'Restore us to thyself, O Lord, that we may be restored!'⁹⁶ And in the Gospels Jesus calls to conversion; it is 'an essential part of the proclamation of the Kingdom'.⁹⁷ Again it is emphasised that 'it is not just a human work. It is the movement of a "contrite heart", drawn and moved by grace to respond to the merciful love of God who loved us first.'⁹⁸

Karl Rahner brings out further dimensions of conversion. It is, he says, 'a fundamental

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 73.. From *Psychology and Alchemy*, p. 12.

⁹³ Karl Rahner, *Conversion*, Conn, *op.cit.*, pp. 203-211, here at p. 203.

⁹⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* No.27. This edition translated from the Latin (before inclusive language became the norm, though being faithful to the Latin original), in 1994, published by Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1994.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, No.26.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* No. 1432. This quote is taken from Lamentations Ch.5.31. We are also referred in the footnotes to Ezk. Ch.36:26-27.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, No. 1427.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, No. 1428.

decision... a basic choice intended to commit the whole of life to God.'⁹⁹ It is, however, as secular opinions would have to agree, 'not wholly accessible to analytic reflection.'¹⁰⁰ Whatever the approach, it remains ultimately a mystery, in the realm of the secret dealings of God with every individual. Rahner then goes on to describe the content of the call. It is:

a summons, imposing an obligation and making obedience to it possible, to receive God, who communicates himself, liberates man from enslaving 'idols' (principalities and powers), and makes it possible to have courage to hope for final liberation and freedom in the direct possession of God as our absolute future. The call therefore summons us from mere finitude (since grace is participation in the divine life itself) and from sinfulness... and of certain dimensions of his own existence in the fundamental decision of his life (since grace is forgiveness).¹⁰¹

Another characteristic is what Rahner calls the 'today' of conversion. By this he means that a conversion may happen at a certain time and place, whether suddenly or over a period of time, but this is 'only a beginning': it has to be lived out over a lifetime in 'daily fidelity'.¹⁰²

In his final point Rahner broadens his approach to include conversion in non-Christian religions, and 'secular analogies' such as 'psycho-therapeutic practice', where the same dynamics are at work', and therefore 'can be judged by the same general criteria.'¹⁰³ He also mentions very briefly in this context 'implicit Christianity', by which it has to be assumed he is referring to his controversial theory of 'anonymous Christianity'.¹⁰⁴ The concept has been criticised, for instance by Hans Kung, who claimed that it 'reaffirmed the doctrine of *'extra ecclesia nulla salus'* (no salvation outside the Church) through the back door'.¹⁰⁵ But in defence Rahner states: 'The exact word may not have any importance, but the matter... is undeniably of central importance for the relations of the contemporary Christian to the world around him.'¹⁰⁶ It is a matter of holding together in

⁹⁹ Rahner, in Conn, *op.cit.*, p. 204.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 204/5.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 206.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* See also *Anonymous Christianity*, in *Theological Investigation: Concerning Vatican Council II*, Vol.6, pp. 390-398.

¹⁰⁵ Sebastian Kim, *In search of Identity*, *op.cit.*, p114. The quote is taken from Kung, *On Being a Christian* (London, Collins, 1997) p. 98.

¹⁰⁶ Rahner, *Anonymous Christians*. in *Theological Investigations*, *op.cit.* p. 396. See also *Christians and the Non-Christian Religions*, in *Theological Investigations*, Vol.5, pp. 115-134.

creative tension the Church's doctrine of salvation through Jesus Christ and the fate of the countless people who lived before he was born, and among those living today the many who do not know him or reject either himself or his role in salvation, for, says Rahner: 'Religion itself appears to many as only one of many forms of man's understanding of himself.'¹⁰⁷ However, Scripture informs us that 'God wants everyone to be saved' (1 Tim:2:4) and that 'the covenant of peace which God made with Noah after the flood has never been abrogated.'¹⁰⁸ According to 'anonymous Christianity', nobody need in theory be excluded from salvation in Jesus Christ, even though they might never explicitly understand it in those terms.

Another of Rahner's key concepts, which he mentions in this context, is that of the 'supernatural existential'. This may be theological terminology for the 'natural religious function' that Jung has deduced as present in all human beings.¹⁰⁹ However it is not altogether clear in Rahner whether grace- which is God himself – is already present in every human person just by virtue of being human, or whether it is just an innate capacity to be open to and receive grace, and salvation. However, the important point is that:

Since God's words will 'effect' what they say – that even before he freely takes up an attitude to it, it stamps and determines man's nature and lends it a character which we may call a 'supernatural existential'. A refusal of this offer would therefore not leave man in a state of pure unimpaired nature, but would bring him into contradiction with himself even in the sphere of his own being.¹¹⁰

It is possible to conclude, therefore, that from the theological perspective, conversion is an intimate encounter between God and the individual man or woman, and a 'call' from him to make a life change in some way, in order to draw him or her closer to God.

7 Conversion from Islam to Christianity

In this final section, which precedes the conversion accounts to Christianity of the two Muslims I have chosen to study, the question is asked whether a Muslim can experience the decision

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p390.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p391.

¹⁰⁹ Frieda Fordham, *op.cit.* p. 69ff.

¹¹⁰ Rahner, *op.cit.*, p. 393.

to become a Christian as a 'call from God'. According to Ishmail Al-Faruqi,¹¹¹ it would seem not. He asserts: 'I would suggest that Christians wishing to enter into dialogue with Muslims eschew the 'personal', 'experiential' basis on which [they base] religious knowledge as epistemologically precarious. Any prejudice or hallucination can then masquerade as 'religion' and claim authority on that basis.'¹¹² 'The orthodox Muslim', says Jean-Marie Gaudeul, 'believes that God speaks through the Koran alone.'¹¹³ Despite Al-Faruqi's claim however, the Qur'an can and does speak in an individual way to believers; the so-called 'Light verse' (Q24:33) states specifically that 'God guides to his light whomever he pleases.'¹¹⁴ However, in his discussion on conversion within Islam in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, David Thomas says that it consists in 'the importance of admitting God's Lordship.... reverting to a norm perceptible to all and to which one is able to conform by one's own efforts.'¹¹⁵ It may be noted here that this emphasis on 'one's own efforts' is in marked contrast to the Christian understanding as described above.

It is true that 'hallucinations', as Al-Faruqi warns, can be mistaken for genuine religious experiences – the psychological approach would confirm this. Discernment is necessary, but they may have their part to play. Here the psychological approach can be helpful as it is able to complement and throw light on the theological/religious approach. Of course one may question whether in Christianity such a direct experience of God may be had, but after giving examples in the Old and New Testaments, (1 Sam 3:6-7, for instance when the young Samuel in the Temple says 'Speak Lord, your servant is listening'), Gaudeul concludes that: 'It seems therefore that we must

¹¹¹ Isma'il Raji Al-Faruqi (1921-86) was born in Palestine in 1921. Educated at the American University in Beirut, he became the last Governor of Galilee. The founding of the State of Israel was the cause of his departure to the United States, where he had an eminent academic career. He was the first Muslim scholar in America to devote himself to the study of comparative religion and Islam. See Atallah Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the twentieth Century*, Ch.4, *Isma'il Raja Al-Faruqi*, p85-96. Here at p. 85.

¹¹² Chambésy meeting (1976), *International Review of Mission*, No.260, October 1976, p385. Quoted by Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Called from Islam to Christ: Why Muslims become Christians*, Monarch Books, London, 1999, Ch.9, *A Call from God*, pp. 219-247, here at p. 220.

¹¹³ Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *op.cit.*, p. 220.

¹¹⁴ Consider, for instance, the mystics, such as Rabia, Rumi....

¹¹⁵ *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* (Gen.Ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe), pub. Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2001, Vol.1, .pp. 435-438, here at p. 435.

accept at least the possibility of a personal experience of God.’¹¹⁶ That God is just as transcendent in the Bible as he is in the Qur’an, is a first principle that must be born in mind.¹¹⁷ The fact that God may ‘speak’ to individual men and women does not diminish his transcendence in any way.

It does seem that in Islam God’s communication with mankind is normally expected to be through the Qur’an and confined to its instructions for living a life pleasing to God. This, according to Gaudeul, is the reason he has observed that a good number of converts from Islam to Christianity have experienced dreams, visions and voices.¹¹⁸ A call to leave Islam would hardly come through the Qur’an and therefore this communication from God may be repressed and pushed back into the subconscious. As a result it has to “raise its voice” to make itself heard.¹¹⁹ A conversion from Islam to Christianity can involve much conflict, as the biographical accounts that follow will amply demonstrate. This may include fear caused by the enormous change taking place in the depths of the psyche, perhaps combined with cultural change, and almost certainly with disapproval or even rejection by family members. Under these circumstances:

It is perfectly understandable that these secret debates in the depths of the spirit, these repressed appeals, finally burst out in the form of symbols, dreams, visions and other phenomena which are familiar to modern psychology, however disturbing they may be for our conscious and rational mind, we should not overlook the fact that the obscure mechanisms of the human psyche are also subject to divine action.¹²⁰

Carl Jung, arguably the most important influence on modern psychology, would, one suspects, be strongly inclined to agree. Dreams, for instance, were for him a very important means of discovering what was going on in a person’s subconscious, where repressed religious concerns would often lie hidden:

A dream he [Jung] says, should ‘be regarded with due seriousness as an actuality that has to be fitted into the conscious attitude as a codetermining factor’, and his experience has shown him that ‘if we meditate on a dream sufficiently long and thoroughly, if we carry it around with us and turn it over and over, something almost always comes of it’.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Gaudeul, *op.cit.*, p. 221.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* One example quoted is that of Moses who could not see the ‘face’ of God. (Exodus 33.20).

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 223. In a footnote he says the proportion is about 10%.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Gaudeul, *op.cit.*, p. 223 and p. 225.

¹²¹ Frieda Fordham, *op.cit.*, Ch.6 *Dreams and their Interpretation*, pp. 97-107, here at p. 97.

Several of the examples given of Jung's interpretation of dreams in the chapter quoted above have religious significance for the dreamer, and lend credence to his theory of the 'religious function', which is in everybody, acknowledged or not., and similarly the 'supernatural existential' described in the theology section above.

8. Ali Mehmet Mulla-Zadé

It seems appropriate here to give a further example of conversion from Islam to Christianity, by highlighting the case of Ali-Mehmet Mulla-Zadé, firstly because he is little known and then because he plays a very important part in the conversion process of Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, which forms the substance of Chapter 5 of thesis. Unlike the converts described in the previous section by Gaudeul, who were drawn to Christianity through dreams and visions, the experience of these two, which involved a long intellectual search, could not have been more different.

As Frédéric Gugelot has documented, there was quite a large influx of intellectuals into Catholicism in France in the early part of the twentieth century, especially in the 1920's.¹²² However, there were only four from Islam, these being Méhémet Ali Mulla-Zadé (baptised 1905), Ibazzen (baptised 1920), Mahmoud Reggui (baptised 1927) and Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil (baptised 1928).¹²³ This small number, Gugelot observes, demonstrates weak missionary efforts with meagre results in Muslim countries. However, this may be due to something intrinsic to Islam, for according to Abd-el-Jalil: 'For a Muslim to change his faith something has to make him think, because he is so sure of his faith and of his religion, that he does not feel the need to be interested in other religions.'¹²⁴ All the converts documented by Gugelot were Muslims in their childhood, and all were converted in their youth, between the ages of twenty and twenty four. In addition all generally reproach their former religion for being one of 'traditions and rites observed without warmth or passion.'¹²⁵ They all found a home in France, which seems to have held a particular attraction,

¹²² Frédéric Gugelot, *La conversion des intellectuels au catholicisme en France (1885-1935)*, Paris: CNRS Editions, 2010. See especially Ch.8, 'Les convertis issus de l'islam', pp. 211-24.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

without however directly influencing their conversion. It does seem, moreover, that they needed a certain distancing from their familiar social background to go through the conversion process, and France, very Catholic as it was then, seemed an ideal environment. The lack of satisfaction they found in their former religion led them to seize, in France, this desire for the absolute. What mattered to them also was that they found a 'religion of love and proximity'. Mulla-Zadé, for instance, said: 'Was it not Christianity: that obscure but fervent exchange, that relationship with God, not distant but living and personal [that drew me]? I felt I was there on the path which formerly had been missing.'¹²⁶ He describes further his discovery of the Church:

What attracts me most strongly in Catholicism is My mother the Church! I sought a mother instinctively in the family, in nationality, a bosom, a mother, but I only found selfish bitterness, or exclusive jealousy without soul. It was then that the Church opened her arms and said to me: I am She whom you seek, the Mother of the human race.'¹²⁷

These converts may have been regarded as renegades in their native countries, but after what they stressed had been a long journey, they found their home in the Church. Because the change was so enormous, they knew it was best to reflect a long time. In his attempt to explain his conversion to his family Mulla-Zadé described this process in a letter to his brother in law:

Four years of reflection have led me to renew my religious ideas and it has resulted in my conversion to Christianity. You know my situation and that of my parents, the strong bonds that bind me to Islam, to understand that I have had to go beyond so many things. I have had to obey the voice of a superior duty which was made manifest to my conscience.'¹²⁸

These conversions from Islam truly tore families apart. As Mulla-Zadé's father wrote to Maurice Blondel, the Catholic philosopher who was his godfather and instrumental in his conversion: 'Last year I lost my daughter who is dead; this year I lose my living son, who leaves me to become a Christian. You may imagine the extent of my affliction.'¹²⁹ His father, who was a doctor, decided to consider him a medical case, because for him his religious excesses indicated madness, and so he prescribed medication for him, including a cold bath every morning. Mulla-Zadé wrote to his brother

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 215. The quote is taken from Mulla-Zadé's 'Autobiographie spirituelle, in Charles Molette, *La Vérité où je la trouve: Mulla-Zadé. Une conscience d'homme dans la lumière de Maurice Blondel* (Paris, Téqui, 1988) p. 38.

¹²⁷ In a letter to Jean Garnier, dated 20th March 1906, in Charles Molette, *op.cit.* p. 202.

¹²⁸ Letter dated 28 June, 1905, See Charles Molette *op.cit.* p. 102.

¹²⁹ Letter of 25 July 1905. See Charles Molette, *op.cit.* p. 109.

that he had no problem accepting these remedies, because his father would eventually have to admit that his problems were not physical, or due to mental derangement.¹³⁰

The conversion of these Muslims, in particular Mulla-Zadé and Abd-el-Jalil, might have taken one stage further the 'battle between Islam and Christianity', but in fact they established themselves as 'specialists on the question of bonds between the two religions', transforming their experience into valuable inter-religious reflexions.¹³¹

Mulla-Zadé (1881-1959) was a Shi'i Muslim, born in Candia on the island of Crete which was then part of the Ottoman Empire. He came from a Turkish family on his father's side, Egyptian/Albanian on his mother's side. His father was a military doctor who, on his return from the Russian/Ottoman war founded a Turkish journal and a library, while at the same time being 'president of the Muslim community'.¹³² After a brief visit to Europe he was so enthused that he decided to send his young son abroad to continue his education. Therefore Mehmet-Ali, at the tender age of fourteen, was sent to pursue his studies at the Lycée Mignonet in Aix-en-Provence. Despite his youth, however, he was at ease with both Turkish and Greek, and had also delved into Persian and Arabic studies. In fact Maurice Borrmans describes him as a 'perfect polyglot'.¹³³ He was soon at the top of his class and progressed quickly through the various grades. In every way, he was a truly outstanding pupil. After studying philosophy under the direction of a disciple of Gratry, Gustave Derépas, in 1900 he enrolled in the faculty of law at the university. He made the most of his time there, frequenting all the associations of the university, absorbing as much as he could of its intellectual life, and thoroughly enjoying its cultural life. At the same time he was very impressed with the evangelical spirit he found among his friends, the 'dames Boissard', one of whom, Félicie

¹³⁰ Gugelot, *op.cit.* p. 219.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* p. 20.

¹³² Maurice Borrmans, 'Brève biographie des deux correspondants', *Paul-Mehmet Mulla-Zadé*, pp. 315-321 in *Mulla-Zadé et Abd-el-Jalil: Deux frères en conversion Du Coran à Jésus, Correspondance 1927-1957*. Paris, Les Editions du Cerf, 2009, here at p. 315.

¹³³ *Ibid.* p. 315.

Boissard, was his godmother at his baptism.¹³⁴

Encounters are very important in the conversion process. All the converts Gugelot describes stress the importance of meetings with people of faith. For Mulla-Zadé contact with the Boissards, ‘a profoundly Christian family’ was very important.¹³⁵ However, by far the most important encounter for him was that with the Catholic philosopher Maurice Blondel.¹³⁶ In 1899 Mulla-Zadé received his bachelor’s degree, and the following year, 1900, registered at the Law Faculty of the University of Aix where Blondel was a professor. With his gifted intellect he responded wholeheartedly to this teacher, who for his part stated that ‘he had never had a more brilliant disciple, nor a [more] faithful interpreter of his own thought’.¹³⁷ Mulla- Zadé for his part, studied assiduously under this professor for three years, between 1902 and 1904, and discovered ‘a Christian philosophy that met his needs.’¹³⁸ At the end of this time he confided in his teacher concerning his desire for baptism, and asked him to be his godfather, to which he agreed. His brief catechumenate was a mere formality after his long initiation into Christianity through ‘four years of observations, lectures, conversations and experiences around the philosophy of the master whom Providence had put in my path.’¹³⁹ He was baptised on 25 January 1905, the feast of the Conversion of St Paul, and took the apostle’s name henceforth as his own baptismal name.

Immediately after his baptism Paul Ali-Mehmet ‘had the courage to spend a whole year at

¹³⁴ *Op.cit.* p. 316. We are not told of the connection with these ladies, but presumably they were close friends who may well have supported him in his conversion process, just as Abd-el-Jalil was perhaps subtly influenced by the Catholic family who gave him hospitality when he first arrived in Paris (see Ch.5 of thesis).

¹³⁵ Gugelot, *op.cit.* p. 217.

¹³⁶ Maurice Blondel (1861-1949), is responsible for the ‘new theology’ that played such a great role in the deliberations and arguments of the Second Vatican Council.’ He speaks of ‘the necessary requirements of a transcendence which the philosophical positions and doctrines attempt to efface, disparage, or force into forgetfulness.’ His best known work is *L’Action* (1893). (Internet Dictionary of Philosophy, accessed September 30th, 2018)

¹³⁷ Vincenzo Poggi, *Ali Mehmet Mulla Zade: A Turk in Rome (1924-1959)*. This internet summary, accessed on 5 Oct. 2018, may be supplemented by a fuller version, in XIV, TURK TARYH KONGRESY Ankara: 9-13 Eylül 2002 Kongreye Sunulan Bildiriler, Vol.III (Ankara, 2005) , pp. 377-302.. See also Vincenzo Poggi and Maurice Borrmans, eds., ‘Paul Ali Mehmet Mulla Zadé islamologo di tre papa, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta*, 292 (2012): 10-240.

¹³⁸ Maurice Borrmans, *op.cit.* p. 316.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 316/17.

home with his Muslim family, confronting a host of difficulties'.¹⁴⁰ When he returned to France he had no desire to repeat his law examination, which he had failed just after the death of his sister, and instead wanted to become a Catholic priest. He would have liked to practice his pastoral ministry in Turkey, but was strongly advised against this by the Turkish politician Ahmed Riza who was living in voluntary exile in Paris.¹⁴¹ Therefore he requested French citizenship which he was granted in 1913, on the eve of the Great War. During this time he worked in army hospitals, progressing to various diplomatic positions because of his language skills, his final posting being in Beirut where he was 'interpreter of the General Staff of the Levant'.¹⁴² Before the war he had been a curate in a local parish of Aix, and returned to this work afterwards, but soon his fortunes were to change dramatically through the instrumentality of his godfather, Maurice Blondel who 'did not like the idea that his godson and best student would labour as an unknown teacher in a small diocesan boarding school.'¹⁴³ Therefore on a visit to Rome in 1924 he sought out Fr Michel d'Herbigny SJ, the President of the Pontifical Oriental Institute, recently founded by Pope Benedict XV in 1917. D'Herbigny agreed to ask Mulla-Zadé to teach a course on Islam at the Institute. He was agreeable and therefore the reigning pope, Pius XI, was consulted and welcomed the idea. Thus began the major work of Mulla-Zadé's career. He was at the Oriental Institute for thirty five years, until his death on 3 March 1959.¹⁴⁴

There is evidence that the tenor of Paul Mulla's teaching was very much based on Louis Massignon's approach to Islam. Vincenzo Poggi has collected the letters that Mulla-Zadé wrote to Herbigny, his employer at the Oriental Institute, in which he mentions his dealings with Massignon, and it would seem that he consulted Massignon about the substance of his courses. In one letter dated 8 September 1924 Massignon is described as 'having given his advice to Mulla', and having

¹⁴⁰ Vincenzo Poggi, *The Mulla-Massignon Connection, As glimpsed in some of Paul Ali Mehmet Mulla's inedited Letters to Michel d'Herbigny*, Studi sull'Oriente Cristiano, Rome, Accademia Angelica – Constantiniana di Lettere, Arti e Scienze, No.8 (2), 2004, pp. 167-188, here at p. 170.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

lent him the notes of his two courses from the College de France for the academic year 1919-1920.¹⁴⁵ The evidence in the correspondence suggests he only knew Massignon from 1919, but he looked up to him as an islamologist and a Christian, and he tried to follow in the footsteps of 'his distinguished friend' in his approach to Islam.¹⁴⁶ In fact Gugelot has argued that both Mulla-Zadé and Abd-el-Jalil, along with their master Massignon, 'influenced pontifical decisions, and played, through their role as teachers, a decisive role in the [Church's] changed perception of Islam.'¹⁴⁷

Paul Mulla was greatly respected during his long sojourn in Rome. With the encouragement of Pius XI he became a professor. Pius also made him his personal counsellor in Muslim matters, and his 'domestic prelate', going on to speak of him in his encyclical *Rerum Orientalum* as someone highly capable of teaching students who were going to minister in Muslim countries.¹⁴⁸ Mulla-Zadé did not publish much because of eye problems and poor health, but 'his teaching, contact with specialists, loyalty towards his former religion (he never spoke of it with contempt or malice) had a deep impact in the Catholic Church.'¹⁴⁹ The important statements on Islam in *Nostra Aetate* of Vatican II were 'partially a result of the patient and serious work of Ali Mehmet Mulla Zadé.'¹⁵⁰ He may have published little but he left an abundant correspondence that spoke of his many friendships and pastoral care for many who sought his advice.

9. Conclusion

From what has been said in this chapter, which has explored the sacred and secular aspects of conversion, it may be deduced that the secular discipline of psychology is able to throw some valuable light onto the conversion process, although it may also be used to potentially destroy the genuineness of the experience as having a religious source, as for instance in the work of Edwin Starbuck, William James, and Sigmund Freud. The social sciences likewise can either facilitate or undermine the religious approach. Discernment and respect for the boundaries of each discipline

¹⁴⁵ Poggi, *op.cit.*, p. 175.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 187.

¹⁴⁷ Gugelot, *op.cit.* p. 223.

¹⁴⁸ Maurice Borrmans, *op.cit.* p. 318.

¹⁴⁹ Poggi, *A Turk in Rome, op.cit.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

are called for, which does not mean they cannot sometimes fruitfully overlap. However, it must be concluded that any study of conversion is not complete without at least some reference to the secular approaches described above, especially in today's world where a purely religious approach may not always be understood or appreciated on its own terms.

CHAPTER 4

HASSAN BARNABA DEHQANI-TAFTI

1 Introduction

As the previous chapter has shown, conversion is a very complex phenomenon which can be approached from different angles, religious, sociological, psychological, etc. These different approaches will be implicit in the following account, which is drawn mainly from Hassan's own account of his journey from Islam to Christianity.¹ However, conversion here, and in the following chapter, is seen as a major intervention of God in the life of an individual, though in both cases culture and family play an important part. This becomes evident especially in the severe effect on both of them of their separation from these elements of their background.

Hassan Dehqani-Tafti's conversion, (by contrast with Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil's) was not sudden, but was a continuous process embedded deep in his culture and his whole life story. His friend and mentor, Kenneth Cragg, in his postscript to Hassan's later biographical work (of which he was the editor): *The Unfolding Design of My World: A Pilgrim in Exile*,² speaks of 'the ultimate sacrament of human biography'.³ 'A biography', he says 'can carry significance for God as giving visibility through time and place to the grace and compassion of God.' Thus the whole of any person's life has a sacred character, apart from the process of conversion. A biography therefore, is not just the recitation of the events of a person's life, but 'theology in action'.

2 A village boy from Taft

Hassan Dehqani-Tafti's beginnings were humble. He was born in 1920 in Taft, a village which was situated in central Iran just beyond the Yezd desert at the foothills of a great range of mountains. This desert and these mountains became part of him, and wherever he went later in life they always represented home. He describes his village as follows:

The village is built on the banks of a great dry stony riverbed, which fills with flood waters

¹ H.B Dehqani-Tafti, *design of my world: Pilgrimage to Christianity*, Seabury Press, New York, 1982.

² H.B.Dehqani-Tafti, *The Unfolding Design of My World: A Pilgrim in Exile*, edited by Kenneth Cragg, pub. Canterbury Press, 2000.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 257

when the winter snows melt upon the high slopes in the spring. Then Taft breaks into beauty; the orchards are pink with peach blossom and the pomegranate trees glisten in the sunshine, their brilliant scarlet flowers aflame in the fresh foliage. The houses are simple, of sun-dried mud brick behind high mud walls; the narrow streets are dusty... Our home had but two rooms and a kitchen.⁴

2.1 Conversion to Christianity and marriage of Hassan's mother

One of the rooms of the house was used by Hassan's mother Sekinah who, having some nursing skills, had converted it into an infirmary where she ministered to the local population, for 'Taft had no hospital'.⁵ Her conversion came about as follows: It happened that her mother, referred to locally as Mulla Zahra because, unusually for that time, especially for a woman, she could read and recite the Qur'an, needed to go to hospital for the treatment of an eye complaint. The only local hospital was one that had been established by Christian missionaries in the nearby town of Yezd before the first world war, where 'the fame of its doctors and nurses had spread far and wide', recounts Hassan.⁶ Mulla Zahra took along with her two daughters who were to act as her nurses. However, they both subsequently trained officially to be nurses at the hospital. It was during this time that Sekinah was drawn to Christianity. She was baptised and confirmed, and 'later on was taught to read and write.'⁷ Hassan remarks that 'she must have suffered a great deal at the hands of her relatives, but in that small community of Christians in Yezd she felt safe.'⁸ This, however was not to last.

During the 1914-18 war the two hospitals in Yezd were obliged to close and the missionaries left. Within a few weeks the two hospitals in Yezd were closed, 'the missionaries had left, and the still infant local church disorganised.'⁹ Sekinah had to return to her village where she was the only Christian. There, according to local custom she had to marry, and so she was given to a relative, a young man named Mohammad who was 'an illiterate but intelligent young man, whose deep

⁴ *Pilgrimage, op.cit.*, p. 9/10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 12.

interest in religion had made him well-loved and respected among those who knew him.’¹⁰ He was to be Hassan’s father.

2.2 Miss Kingdon the missionary: death of Hassan’s mother

After the war the hospitals were able to reopen and the missionaries came back. One of these, a rather formidable lady called Miss W. A. Kingdon was to play an important role in Hassan’s conversion process. As part of her missionary endeavour at this time she would go round the local villages on a donkey, holding small group meetings in various people’s houses where they would ‘sing and talk’ around Gospel themes and stories.¹¹ One entry in Miss Kingdon’s diary records a visit to Hassan’s house, ‘where’, she said, ‘we had a nice little meeting, about 25 or so. They listened well.’¹² And so, says Hassan, ‘the words of the Gospel were echoed in our house when I was about one year old’.¹³ His mother was seemingly able to continue with her Christian life unhindered during these early years of Hassan’s childhood. He describes happy memories of her role in the village:

When I was about four years old, crowds of sick people used to come to our house where my mother’s dispensary was. She has remained in my mind as the central figure to whom everybody referred his or her problems. Her figure is vivid in my memory, always on the move, trying to do what she could, quietly and kindly.¹⁴

Sadly the happy years of the future convert’s childhood ended when his mother died of tuberculosis when he was five years old. Without her earnings the family was plunged into poverty; his father had to work harder and his brother had to leave school in order to work. His only sister died whilst still a baby from lack of adequate care and nourishment. The young Hassan, ‘not yet old enough to earn [his] living, nor young enough to die like [his] sister from lack of care and attention’, describes himself at this time as ‘just growing haphazardly, like one of the many thousands of thorn bushes growing in the deserts around Taft’.¹⁵

¹⁰ *Ibid.*,

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p13.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

2.3 The question of a Christian education

It happened that just before Hassan's mother died a few of her friends, including a doctor from the women's hospital in Yezd, visited her in Taft, and she took this opportunity to request that at least one of her children be brought up a Christian. Under the circumstances this was a virtual impossibility; it would be necessary to send the child to a Christian school, rendered extremely unlikely by the fact that this was a strictly Muslim household and they were in addition very poor. Nevertheless, Miss Kingdon, a very strong character who loved Sekinah, was determined to do all in her power to implement her last wish, and kept on pressing Hassan's father to let his son go to a Christian school. But, remarks Hassan, 'those who are familiar with Muslim countries know how impossible it is for a Muslim father to let his child be taken away from him by non-Muslims for education.'¹⁶ Miss Kingdon, however, was not to be discouraged by such strictures. She continued her policy of persuasion till Hassan reached the age of six and a half, when his father finally yielded to the extent that he agreed to consult the Qur'an. He could not read but, but as was the custom in such cases, he opened the book at random and consulted a Mulla who interpreted the text favourably, as it happened, and Hassan, against all the odds, was allowed to go to the Christian school. Hassan comments, 'When God has a design for someone, who are we to say that He does not rule the opening of the pages of the Quran by a Mulla?'¹⁷

There was only a girl's school in Yezd, so that was where Hassan had to go for his initial education. It was fifteen miles away and his father travelled there with him all the way by night through the desert. 'I either walked with my father or was carried on his shoulders', says Hassan.¹⁸ On arrival he was given accommodation in the house of a newly married Persian Christian couple, which was not an ideal situation as they had a small baby and Hassan tended to be side-lined.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p19. This is the practice of *Istekhara* whereby the Mulla takes a copy of the Qur'an, opens it at random and puts a finger on a verse. If that verse proves to have a positive result for the Mulla then the person can go ahead with whatever the reason for seeking guidance was. The Mulla's answer can be at random and he can answer anyway he likes. There is no definite method as to how he decides. This information was given to me by Margaret Dehqani-Tafti, widow of Hassan, who was born in Iran and lived there until the troubles following the Revolution of 1979 (letter of 20.10.2010).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

However, recounts Hassan, they had their 'Persian warm-heartedness' and the wife, 'by request of Miss Kingdon, taught me the Lord's Prayer.'¹⁹

On the whole therefore, despite the loss of his mother, and the departure from his home village and relatives, Hassan was happy at this school where, among other things, he learned the Persian alphabet, attended Bible classes and learned some psalms by heart.²⁰ However, when he was seven a problem arose in that they could not keep a boy of that age in a girl's school. 'No doubt' says Hassan, 'there must have been another struggle between Miss Kingdon and my father... and somehow Miss Kingdon got her way again.'²¹ So he was allowed to go to school in Isfahan where the mission had a boy's college with a preparatory school. There, he says, 'I was handed over to a man who was destined to play a great role in my life. He was the head of the school and his name was Jalil Aqa.'²²

3 Isfahan

Isfahan is one of the largest and loveliest towns in the country and has a long and illustrious history. Hassan describes it thus:

Its history goes back to Cyrus the Great and to the glories of pre-Islamic Iran. There are ruins of ancient fire-temples where the Zoroastrian inhabitants of Isfahan used to hold services in honour of fire and light. The Arab Invasion of Iran in the 7th century made Isfahan into a Muslim town. The most glorious time in its history belongs to the period of the Safavis in the 17th century. Isfahan was made their capital, and they spent their energy, time and talents in making it beautiful. They made a large square in the middle of the town, one of the biggest in the world, even to this day, and called it Naqsh-i-Jahan, 'the Design of the World'.²³

This square was the inspiration behind the title of Hassan's autobiography, 'The Unfolding Design of My World: a Pilgrim in Exile', a clear indication of his desire to root his life story and his conversion in the context of his own country and its Islamic heritage. When he first went there it seemed a different world, almost a foreign country, but it was here that he was destined to spend much of his life and exercise his Christian ministry, and so it became his home as much as the little

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20/21.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

village of Taft.

3.1 Christian history of Isfahan

Christianity came to Isfahan quite early, in the era of the Safavis (1499-1739) when 'Isfahan was transformed from a provincial city into one of the largest capitals in the world of its day.'²⁴ It was during this time that 'Shah Abbass moved thousands of Armenians from his northwest domains to his capital', where he built them a small town on the south bank of the river.²⁵ The Armenians, who were Christian, called it Julfa after a town of the same name in their native land. They had very little contact with the Muslims over the river: 'they were not allowed to cross the bridge which lies between them and the town lest they might make the town unclean'.²⁶ Preaching the gospel was completely out of the question, and so 'the Armenian church became more and more inward-looking and enclosed, and lost its evangelistic spirit.'²⁷ As a result it seems the Christian community was not very vibrant, but this situation changed at the end of the nineteenth century when the Church Missionary Society built a hospital and school in Julfa.²⁸ The educational, medical and evangelistic work of these missionaries, after tentative beginnings, was officially sanctioned in 1875. Iran was recognised by the missionaries to be 'stony ground'; there was no question of creating a 'burgeoning Iranian Church, but their efforts did lead to the creation of an indigenous church, albeit an extremely small one.'²⁹

The Christians of Julfa were not at this time allowed into Isfahan but somehow a rather gentle missionary doctor especially endowed with gifts of gentleness, meekness and friendship, bought a piece of land in the town itself, and started to build a much needed hospital there.³⁰ This

²⁴ Wilfrid Blunt, *Isfahan: Pearl of Persia*, Pallas Athene (Publishers)Ltd., London 1966, this edition 2009., p. 27. I am grateful to Margaret Dehqani-Tafti for the gift of this book on the last occasion that we met before her death.

²⁵ Dehqani-Tafti, *Pilgrimage to Christianity*, *op.cit.* p. 24.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Gulnar Eleanor Francis-Dehqani, *Religious Feminism in an Age of Empire: CMS Missionaries in Iran, 1869-1934*, CCSRG Monograph Series, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Bristol, 2000. This is the author's doctoral thesis. She is the youngest daughter of Hassan, and has recently been appointed Bishop of Loughborough, Leicester, UK (July 2017).

³⁰ *Pilgrimage to Christianity*, *op.cit.* p. 25. The date is not given.

was soon followed by a church built in the middle of the compound. Eventually the mission school in Julfa transferred to the town, and this was followed by another successful purchase of land on which was built the Stuart Memorial College.³¹ It was in a small school built next to this, called 'The College Branch School' that Hassan was destined to continue his education.

3.2 Hassan's education in Isfahan: the influence of Jalil Aqa, a Persian Christian convert

According to the sequential stage model of conversion of Lewis Rambo, described in Ch.3 of thesis, the 'context' is now in place for Hassan's conversion to begin in earnest. 'Crisis' and 'encounter' normally accompany the process, and here Hassan's is about to enter a very difficult stage which might be described as a 'crisis', though it is long drawn out rather than sharp and sudden, and continues in his on-going conversion process when he eventually goes to Cambridge University, the 'crisis' in this case being brought about by cultural factors. A significant 'encounter' which influences the process is his relationship with Jalil Aqa, as described below.

Jalil Aqa, headmaster of The College Branch School was to have a considerable influence on Hassan's ongoing conversion process. This was not in any direct way, despite his own recent conversion from Islam to Christianity, but he influenced his pupil profoundly, indirectly in that Hassan was able to see in his headmaster an expression of Christianity totally at home in Persian culture, especially as expressed in the poetry and calligraphy that both loved. As will be seen later, when Hassan was sent to England for further study after his definitive conversion to Christianity, the change of culture had a profoundly negative effect on him which he had to struggle hard to overcome. Hassan describes Jalil's background as follows:

By race Jalil was a Cossack. Jalil's father, Khalil, was a colonel in the army of the king of that day, and he was brought to Isfahan to train the local army. Khalil was a Sunni Muslim and had strong tendencies towards mysticism. He took a great deal of trouble over the education of his son, Jalil, whose aptitude for learning and artistic abilities soon made him a poet, a first-rate calligrapher and well-versed in Persian literature. The wise father saw to it also that his son should learn French and English, which in those days was very rare indeed.³²

³¹ 'In memory of a retired bishop from New Zealand, whose love for the Muslim had brought him to Iran in old age.' *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

In fact Jalil became deeply immersed in Persian culture; he had, says Hassan, 'digested the best of Persian culture, and then had baptised the whole into Christianity.'³³ This was vitally important for Hassan as he saw in his teacher a form of Christianity to which he could easily relate. In addition his own growing love of poetry and literature was encouraged, an aspect of himself that became integrated ever more deeply into his Christian life. Like his teacher, in time he would write many hymns for the Persian Church.

Jalil's conversion had happened at a Christian hospital where he had to go for treatment of a chest complaint. There 'he talked with the Christians and read their Bible', and 'his mystic spirit was attracted by the Person of Jesus Christ, and he gave his abilities to Him and to His Church.'³⁴ Under such a teacher as Jalil, Hassan made great progress, despite the fact that he was somewhat spoiled. In Hassan's opinion:

My being a small motherless boy away from home must have appealed to his poetical sensitivity. Also he must have seen in me some likeness to himself, for even at the earliest stages of my education I loved poetry and calligraphy; this always creates love between father and son, teacher and pupil, friend and friend.³⁵

The school curriculum consisted of calligraphy, bible reading and poetry, and under his teacher's tutelage Hassan soon began composing his own verse. The teacher/pupil relationship he enjoyed, however, was not altogether healthy for, he admits: 'The more I showed signs of progress in these things, the more his exaggerated praises of me increased.'³⁶ This could add to Hassan's problems when he went home to his family for the summer holidays, problems which were to worsen as he was to become gradually more committed to Christianity. He speaks of 'a series of jumps from one side of a ditch to the other', the 'ditch' being the ever-widening gap between his early home life and his school life, and also between Christianity and Islam.³⁷ He describes himself as being, in his boyhood innocence, 'a conceited young fellow', a 'conceited little evangelist who

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

would argue vigorously with his father, brother, and the elders of the village.’³⁸ But as the holidays progressed his Islam reasserted itself. He describes it thus: ‘The Lord’s Prayer would turn into the Surahs of Praise and Unity from the Quran; so when I was back at school again after the long summer holidays, I would start as a Muslim and gradually change into a Christian as the influence of the school grew.’³⁹

This happened for two summer holidays when he was ten and eleven years old. But, he recounts; ‘By the time I was twelve the school influence outweighed the home influence and I had decided to be a Christian’.⁴⁰ At this stage Hassan’s conversion process was very much influenced by the cultural environment, whether Islamic at home or Christian at school, which seemed to indicate it was not very deep-rooted, although Hassan claims that from the age of twelve it was so. It was not long before that youthful conviction would be put to the test.

3.3 Back to the village and Islamic schooling: the Qur’an is consulted again

Hassan’s father was understandably upset at the way his son’s religious life seemed to be developing, as was his brother. Therefore between them they decided not to let him go back to Isfahan and sent him to a one roomed school in the village run by a Mulla. However the mulla humiliated the young boy to such an extent (presumably on account of his religious beliefs, and questionable attitude towards his father) that Hassan in the end refused to attend. His father did not insist that he do so but sent him instead to the local government school which had just started. It was Hassan’s religious convictions that were undoubtedly the cause of his father’s concern, for he said to him, ‘You are still a child, and I am responsible for your religion.’⁴¹ However, he did concede that at the age of fifteen Hassan could choose for himself. At this juncture Hassan’s Christian education could have been over for good, but seemingly, as he himself put it:

God’s design for [my] life was not to be interfered with. All of a sudden six letters arrived, some addressed to my father and some to myself, all imploring my father to let me go...Two were from Miss Kingdon. Another was from Jalil my beloved teacher, who had written in his

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

own lovely handwriting to my father advising him to reconsider his decision.⁴²

Finally Miss Kingdon sent two Christians from the Yezd church to persuade his father to reconsider.

As a result of all this pressure Hassan's father decided to allow the Quran to be consulted again, and again the reading was positive in Hassan's favour, and so his father submitted to what would seem to be the will of God and allowed his son to return to Isfahan.⁴³

3.4 Return to Isfahan: health problems

In the event it was no easy return. To begin with the government had ordered the closure of all foreign primary schools, which included his. Fortunately, however, permission was obtained for it to remain open a little longer, so that in fact Hassan managed to finish his primary education in a Christian school.

The next blow was the death of Jalil's wife. Hassan explains that '[h]is artistic and sensitive nature was so affected by this cruel event that to the end of his life his was never quite himself again.'⁴⁴ Jalil and his Christian wife had taken care of Hassan in the little hostel next to the school, but now Hassan suffered some neglect. He describes his situation at this time: 'As a boy I was never very strong. I was thin and small, and my somewhat delicate physical condition was not improved by the lack of any responsible person to look after me... Everybody was far more interested in my spiritual welfare than in my bodily growth.'⁴⁵ As a result his health began to deteriorate, and in his fifteenth and sixteenth years he spent about six months in and out of hospital. He was ill with sunstroke, malaria, and various fevers and was not able to take his final school exams. His health was a concern to all around him, and not least himself. The fear was that he would develop tuberculosis and die young like his mother. However, in the end the missionary pastor of Isfahan solved the immediate problem by giving him a room on his own in some far corner of the compound, for 'missionaries', it was argued, 'do not live a normal life according to the standards of

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

the country'.⁴⁶ The pastor would come every night to his room to make sure he was eating and sleeping properly, and eventually he made a good recovery.

3.5 Hassan's conversion matures: baptism and rejection by his father

During all these trials Hassan's commitment to Christianity came to maturity. He decided on Christianity, he claims, when he was only ten years old, and it is significant that as with his teacher Jalil, it was the person and teachings of Jesus Christ that drew him. He describes it as follows:

After my second visit to Taft when I was about ten years old, I had decided to follow in my mother's footsteps and become a Christian. The teachings of Jesus Christ I came to regard as being higher and lovelier than any I had yet come across. Love, even towards one's enemies, purity in thought and heart, monogamy, the idea of marriage for life, and finally the Christian attitude not only towards life but also towards death made me prefer Christianity to any other religion.⁴⁷

His desire to be a Christian grew stronger in his teenage years. In fact we find him practicing a rather 'muscular' Christianity when he was seventeen. This approach assumes one can achieve holiness by dint of 'hard work' and one's own good deeds alone. Bent on Christian 'perfection' he had a book in which he had recorded no less than seventy seven resolutions. 'He was', he says, 'feeling particularly religious and anxious to be as perfect as possible.'⁴⁸ This, in fact, is an immature approach to the spiritual life, and so unsurprisingly he was not allowed to be baptised until he was eighteen years old. Before this event took place he wrote what he called 'a very hard letter' to his father and brother announcing his intention to take this decisive step in his conversion process. He said to them:

Man cannot please God by fasting, pilgrimage and even prayer. God is not in need of these things. He only wants a pure and strong faith. No one can save himself, but God will save those who seek Him. Of course you know that everyone is free to choose his religion for himself, and I will be eighteen soon. I have found the joy and happiness that I want in Jesus Christ. Dear father and brother, I know you will be sad and angry when you read this, but this is what I have found out for myself from God, and I hope you will read from our Mother's Bible which is still in our house. Please, father, do not count yourself responsible for my religion. I will soon be eighteen and will be legally responsible for myself.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Despite the pain and anger he knew he was causing to his father and brother, he describes the year of his baptism and the two following as the 'happiest I had yet spent'.⁵⁰

He was soon to have a painful struggle for his faith, however, on his first visit home as a baptized Christian. 'My father and brother tried their best to convince me I was wrong', he said.⁵¹ In addition the villagers were not pleasant, and old friends passed him by without speaking. His family regarded him as unclean and would not eat from the same bowl. They changed their clothes and washed when they wanted to pray. However, despite this Hassan said his family were loving and hospitable, which paradoxically made his cross harder to bear. He only heard, he says, 'one hard thing' from his father, but it was hard indeed: 'When your letter came telling us of your decision,' he said, 'I dreamt that my right hand was cut off, and that meant you! You are no longer part of us!'⁵² The pain of this must have been severe for Hassan, as it indicated without any doubt that his father had rejected him, but somehow he was able to put it aside and throw himself into his work for the Church.

3.6 The end of Hassan's education in Isfahan

Once back in Isfahan Hassan was given more responsibility which included reading lessons in services, writing and translating new hymns, and taking an active part in the Christian Union of the college. In his own account he remarks that 'the unconscious happy zeal of those days is unforgettable.'⁵³ But it was not to last. Just before his last year at school a decree came from Teheran that all foreign educational institutions were to be handed over to the government. However, on application permission was granted for a year's respite which providentially allowed Hassan to complete his education in a Christian school. 'It appears very strange', he recounts, 'that once again the respite was given for me to finish my secondary education in a Christian college!'⁵⁴ In 1939 the second world war broke out and in 1940, the year he received his diploma, Hassan records

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.* p35

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p36

that 'the College and the hostel which had become so dear to me passed out of the hands of the mission and the church.'⁵⁵ A new phase was now beginning in his life which was to include university in Teheran, military service, and further study in Cambridge during the course of which his new found faith would be tested, almost to extinction.

4 University education in Teheran: call to the ministry

Hassan had felt for some time a call to the ministry, but now he offered himself definitively and put himself at the disposal of the Church Council but they decided, despite the risks to his faith, to send him first to Teheran University, for which he was given a scholarship annually. Teheran, unlike Isfahan, was a city newly built by the father of Reza Shah who decided to modernise his capital, and as part of this project built a modern university. Hassan found there that 'secularism was the fashion' and 'young people were more interested in Western Philosophy than in Eastern Religions.'⁵⁶ Despite these challenging circumstances Hassan's Christian faith thrived. He enjoyed the study and took the advice of the missionaries in Isfahan to keep on praying and attending Church. He found a refuge from the secular atmosphere of the university at the Presbyterian church in the American mission that he used to attend. One of the older missionaries was particularly helpful. Hassan describes their meetings as follows:

In his quiet, humble and deep way he used to listen patiently to my unending questions, and then would give short simple answers which would keep me thinking for a long time... In fact the home of these missionaries in Teheran was a refuge for my confused head and wondering spirit in those days in the disturbed atmosphere of the capital.⁵⁷

Some of the 'intimate circle' of his university friends knew he was a Christian. 'Some were interested', records Hassan, and others 'disgusted, but the majority were indifferent'. They thought, he says 'that there was something strange about me to be seriously thinking about things religious in the twentieth century!' ⁵⁸ In the holidays he went back to Isfahan where he enjoyed the company of his old missionary friends and shared their work, mainly with youth. He also visited 'his people', but

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39/40.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

‘found the gap between us every widening’.⁵⁹ On the whole, therefore, Hassan’s university experience was positive, and he thrived, despite the secular atmosphere and a certain challenge to his faith.

5 Military service

On graduating from university in 1943 Hassan went, as was required of all graduates, straight to the Officer’s Training College. He foresaw problems since he was convinced that as a Christian he should be against fighting of any kind. This gives an interesting insight into the mentality of a new convert from a non-Christian background, since he follows literally what Jesus said and did in the gospels, for instance when he forbade Peter to use his sword in the garden of Gethsemane when he was being arrested (Jn.18:20). In this area doctrine has developed and we now have a theory of the ‘just war’, whereby warfare is hedged around with various conditions which must be adhered to for it to be ‘legitimate’. Arguably at the time Hassan was unaware of this, but in any case he was convinced that his faith would not allow him to be a combatant in war. He managed to obtain an interview with the Chief of the General staff in order to make his position clear, but he was not sympathetic, saying it was ‘the responsibility of the Officers’ Training College’ to train him ‘in any line they saw fit.’⁶⁰

Sometime later all the recruits had to fill in forms with their particulars, which meant Hassan had to publicly declare his Christianity. Soon afterwards his Commanding Officer summoned him forward in front of the whole company and asked him what his religion was. He said he was a Christian, upon which he was questioned about his family background. He was upbraided for taking the religion of his mother rather than his father but he boldly answered, ‘I have not taken up anybody’s religion. I have chosen myself to be a Christian.’ To which the Officer responded, ‘Away with you! I cannot trust you any longer.’⁶¹ Hassan responded that the reverse should be the case

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

since he could easily have lied about his religion but did not wish to deceive anyone.⁶² He was not as a result of this interchange treated unkindly, and one of the sergeants even ‘drew much nearer’ to him because of this ‘open witness’.⁶³ It would seem that Hassan’s time in the military was also a positive experience on the whole, and he was not disconcerted by the above challenges to his religion.

6 Return to Isfahan: the world of work

At the end of his training Hassan was commissioned as a 2nd lieutenant Staff Officer, and engaged to be secretary-interpreter to an American colonel who had just been appointed advisor to the Isfahan Division, a position which suited him well. ‘Isfahan had really become my home’, he said, ‘and the members of St. Luke’s church there my family.’⁶⁴ He was back where he belonged, had a regular and good salary, and was able to give his free time to Church activities. But now came the next major turning point in his life, and a further stage in the on-going process of his conversion.

As his military service drew to an end he had offered himself for ordination as a minister in his Church, and was rather surprised to be told to go on with his job for a while. Then after a few months he was asked to take different work – church work, with a view to ordination. This meant giving up his regular salary. There was much pressure from his family and friends, and the Colonel he worked for, who highly valued his services, not to do this. Not surprisingly his family hated the idea of his ordination, but they liked the fact that he had a good job, recognising that with this ‘he would raise the standard of living of the whole family.’⁶⁵ However, Hassan stood firm in his conversion process, and advanced a step further as he resisted the pressure, being ‘vaguely aware of the dangers of money and position, and of how they could unconsciously and gradually choke the spirit within one.’⁶⁶ He was particularly concerned about his family, not only for the loss of financial support he could have given them, but also the effect his future ordination would have on them. He

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43/44.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

describes his state of mind as follows:

The turmoil was not only theirs, but mine too and perhaps even more severely. By choosing to follow Christ I had separated myself from them, but now I knew that ordination would mean cutting myself off even more deeply from them, and indeed from almost the entire social life of my own country. The uprooting, loneliness and lifelong inner tension tend to be so terrific that it has led some Christians to doubt whether it is wise to make converts of individuals, without their families, in non-Christian lands.⁶⁷

The wisdom of this was to come home fully to Hassan when he was sent to England, where he discovered that being alone, out of his familiar cultural setting, was even harder than the separation from his family. However, unbeknown to him at the time, England was destined one day to be his home and the place of his burial.

7 Spiritual crisis

When Hassan was first back in Isfahan everything seemed to be well. All seemed to be proceeding as planned and he was doing what he loved which was mostly working with youth and reading Christian literature, no doubt involving translation into Persian. But inwardly he was not at peace, without really knowing the reason why. He describes this situation as follows:

Inwardly I was not at rest and I did not know why. I wanted to progress in Christian character, fight bad habits and replace them with nobler ones, but somehow I used to fail horribly. Deep down in my spirit I felt utterly alone and weak. One of the elderly ladies of the mission got very near to me. I used to tell her everything, and used to pour out my difficulties and troubles to her. She acted like a mother and was a great help to me, but the restlessness inside me continued.⁶⁸

This 'restlessness' would reach a climax and cause a major crisis when Hassan was sent to Cambridge, England, for further study, where he was alone and far from his own culture. After two years of parish work in Isfahan it was decided that Hassan should go to Ridley Hall in the University of Cambridge for theological study, and it was here that his spiritual crisis deepened, but fortunately he came out of it the stronger and more able to face the trials of his ministry as bishop in Iran which culminated in the loss of practically everything he had so painstakingly built up.

7.1 Theological study at Cambridge University: struggle and rebellion

When Hassan first arrived in Cambridge there was no hint of the trouble to come. With a

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

sense of wonder he said: 'Here was I, the son of the desert and mountains of Yezd, where life had not changed for the last three thousand years at least, studying theology in Cambridge, the heart of the best that the Western world could offer!'⁶⁹ In fact it was love at first sight and he was intoxicated. The soft green lawns seemed magical after the desert terrain around his native Taft and it filled him with wonder, joy and amazement. It all seemed like a very sweet dream. This initial euphoria, however, soon gave way to a restlessness more intense than before, which was to lead him to the brink of despair. He says of himself:

The old restlessness of the spirit cropped up again and this time in a more intensified way. There was a war inside me, the old war which must have troubled St. Paul when he wrote: 'I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate (Rom.7:15). It was as if these words were written for me. How long, O Lord? Where was the power of Christ which strengthened St Paul to do all things, but did not seem to be strengthening me?'⁷⁰

There seem to have been several contributory factors leading to this state of mind, but undoubtedly they were directly or indirectly related to his conversion process, and were most likely triggered by the fact of finding himself suddenly in a totally foreign environment far from home, and without all the familiar supports of his own culture, including the missionaries who had nurtured his faith. The loss of his mother in early childhood and separation from his family for educational purposes were also no doubt contributory factors. He speaks of becoming 'lonelier and lonelier' within himself, and 'sinking into the lowest state of unbelief and despair.'⁷¹ He continued:

I blamed God for having taken my mother from me so early in my life, for deep down within myself I felt a vacuum for love – to have been loved by someone for what I was, and not for what people would like me to be. The thought of a mother's warm bosom and a father's welcoming arms was so deep an unsatisfied desire within me, that thinking about it used to leave me cold and desolate.⁷²

In this state of mind Hassan used to lie awake for long hours dwelling on his misery 'to such a degree that the thought of suicide started to creep in'.⁷³

During this difficult time, he began to blame the very people who had nourished his faith for

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

causing this extremely painful separation from his own people. 'Had I stayed in Taft amongst my own people' he lamented, 'I would probably not have had any of these tensions which are tearing me to pieces.' And again, 'Why has Miss Kingdon taken me from where I was *me*?' He felt he had forfeited what was irreplaceable. 'Those people (i.e. the missionaries) were not my people' he said.⁷⁴ He describes the 'waves of self-pity and despair' as being so tremendous, that 'like Job, I used to curse the day I was born.'⁷⁵ Amazingly during all this time, Hassan continued to attend lectures, sat exams as normal, and went regularly to chapel. Some friends to whom he could speak a little tried to comfort him with what he described as religious clichés, such as: 'Surrender yourself to Christ'; 'pray and he will grant you peace of mind', which did not help.⁷⁶

7.2 Spiritual healing

How did Hassan come through this trial? First he wrote a letter to a Christian psychologist asking for help, but got no answer. Then one day an undergraduate who was keen on Moral Rearmament and 'knew a Christian leader who had been able to help a number of young people through their difficulties', advised him to ask him for help.⁷⁷ This was a certain Bishop Stephen Neill who had helped many at times of severe mental strain.⁷⁸

Hassan took this student's advice and meetings with the bishop were arranged. They only had about six meetings but for Hassan they transformed the whole situation. In the first interview, says Hassan, 'he listened to me for about two hours pouring out my heart to him with tears.'⁷⁹ The bishop seems to have become a father figure to him, not only in his spiritual life but also in some way compensating for the estrangement his conversion caused with his natural father. They corresponded often, but unfortunately the letters are not accessible, having been destroyed when

⁷⁴ *Unfolding Design of My World, op.cit.* p. 116.

⁷⁵ *Pilgrimage, op.cit.*, p. 49.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Unfolding Design of My World. op.cit.*, p. 122. Bishop Neill, who died in 1984, was a Fellow of Trinity College who gave up a distinguished academic career to be a missionary in India.

⁷⁹ *Pilgrimage, op.cit.*, p. 50.

the family home in Isfahan was looted at the time of the Islamic Revolution.⁸⁰ One wonders what kind of advice they contained, but Hassan claims that it was nothing that others could not have told him just as well. It just happened that Bishop Neill was God's chosen instrument, to be a channel of grace when he needed it, and his message was basically: *trust in God*. 'Can it really be that simple?' asked Hassan. 'Yes, that simple', was the reply.⁸¹ He found himself saying with Job: 'Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand... I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes (Job Ch.42: 5, 6).'⁸²

7.3 Repentance

In the above passage from Job Hassan recognised, in addition to his other problems, though not unrelated, a need for repentance. He discovered, for instance, that he needed to repent from 'regarding [himself] as the centre of the world.' 'I had never realized', he said, 'what a self-centred man I really was.'⁸³ This recalls his time in Isfahan when his teacher Jalil praised him so much that he became puffed up with self-confidence and pride, to the great annoyance of his family when he went home for the holidays. Now metaphorical scales fell from his eyes and he exclaimed:

How people tolerated me at Ridley I do not know! I shudder to think there was a time when I truly believed the whole of our Church in Iran depended on me... if I was going to be a useful servant of God for His Church, this awful unconscious pride had to be broken, and a miracle needs to happen if a conceited young man is to repent.⁸⁴

The 'miracle' it would seem, did happen through his repentance, and he was now ready to return to Iran for whatever God had in store for him there. The Book of Job meant a great deal to him at this time, especially the ending, quoted above (Job 42:6). He said: 'through these verses of Job, 'God melted me in the crucible of humility.'⁸⁵ He sums up his state of mind/spirit before he left

Cambridge as follows:

I needed repentance; not in a pietistic sense, but deep within. ... not from this wrong or that, but from the whole edifice of my self-esteem, to know myself as a speck of dust before the

⁸⁰ See *Unfolding Design, op.cit.* p. 118.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁸² *Pilgrimage, op.cit.*, p. 52 .

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁸⁵ *Unfolding Design, op.cit.*, p. 120.

unimaginable reality of God. I came down... to dwell in the lowly place where there is rest from the striving of self-will. I felt a process of healing was underway within.⁸⁶

8 Return to Iran

8.1 Farewell to Miss Kingdon

As his time in Cambridge drew to a close, Hassan was offered a job there, but he knew he had to go back to his own country. 'With all the fascination that England, especially Cambridge, had for me', he said, 'it never crossed my mind not to return to Persia.'⁸⁷ Before he did go, however, he spent a few days with Miss Kingdon, now retired and close to death. They spoke about Taft, and his mother, and the church there. He reports that 'although she did not agree with my theological outlook, she was delighted and proud to see me.'⁸⁸ Her look, as they parted, he said, 'had something of the look of a proud mother for her son.'⁸⁹ When he was leaving the country she came to the train station with him, and 'in saying farewell for the last time, it was as if she was singing the *Nunc Dimittis*'.⁹⁰ She died soon after he reached home.

8.2 Early ministry and marriage.

The rest of Hassan's story consists in the living out of his conversion and commitment to Christianity, which involved living through the difficult time of the Islamic Revolution which began in 1979, and his subsequent exile in England. However, to begin with, he moved quickly into a period of deep satisfaction on the personal level and one of prosperity and growth for the Church. 'On 18th October, (St Luke's Day)', he relates, 'I was made a deacon by the Bishop in Iran in St Luke's Church, Isfahan.'⁹¹ Ten months later, in 1950, he was ordained and began his career as a pastor of St Luke's church, Isfahan. At this time he says of himself: 'My whole goal in life was to interpret the Christ I loved and be ardent in relating him to all, to socialise and care in a spontaneous way, without

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁸⁷ *Pilgrimage, op. cit.*, p. 55.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

prejudice.’⁹² Nevertheless he had to struggle with a certain amount of tension at this time since he was regarded with suspicion. ‘The Detective Bureau of Police’, he reports, ‘regularly visited the church to listen to my sermons.’⁹³ But for the moment he was left in peace, although this presaged trouble for the future.

His personal happiness was completed by his marriage in June 1952 to Margaret, daughter of Bishop Thompson, the Anglican Bishop in Iran. Her brave and unflinching support in their later time of trial must have helped him enormously to cope with the tremendous pressure he was under. Also, after his alienation from his own family because of his conversion, it must have been a great joy to have his own Christian family.⁹⁴ During these early years of Hassan’s ministry, despite small incidents of spying and harassment and a certain unrest in the community at large, the situation was calm and the Church’s work prospered. Also his family grew to include three girls and a boy; the latter, who was to die in tragic circumstances, to be described later, was born in 1955.

8.3 First encounters with Kenneth Cragg

Visitors from abroad would pass through Hassan’s parish on a regular basis and he would invite them to speak to his flock, with himself acting as interpreter if necessary. Among them was Kenneth Cragg, at that time Travelling Secretary of the Near Eastern Council of Churches, who first arrived in 1957.⁹⁵ Hassan became very familiar with Cragg’s thought at this time, as he regularly had to render it into his ‘best Persian.’⁹⁶ It began with Hassan translating his words into Persian for his own congregation, but developed into a life-long friendship. Providentially the first visit came when Hassan felt the need, after eight years of ministry, of ‘some declogging of heart and mind’, and Cragg’s friendship at this time was like a ‘refreshing breeze’.⁹⁷ He found himself responding to how Cragg seemed to find a way into Islam with a certain ‘gentleness and modest warmth of heart’ that

⁹² *Unfolding Design of My World, op,cit.*, p. 127.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ See *ibid.*, pp. 128-135.

⁹⁵ See *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 148. The influence of Cragg’s thought on Hassan’s writing will be discussed in Ch.7 of thesis.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

he could emulate.⁹⁸ About Cragg's influence Hassan writes:

Some of the inner contradictions and tensions I had known in my past were resolved in fresh hope and purpose and a new harmony of mind and rest of heart. For the comprehending love between us we could both render to God thanksgiving as being, authentically, 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit...I had come across a teacher apt to meet my deepest mental and spiritual need of strength and wisdom.'⁹⁹

It was at this time, the late 1950's, that Hassan began writing his own story of his pilgrimage from Islam to Christianity in which he describes how he personally came to grips with the profound differences he perceived between Islam and Christianity, and how he tried to resolve them in his own understanding of Christianity.¹⁰⁰ It happened that about this time Kenneth Cragg had recently published *The Call of the Minaret*, a still popular, seminal work in the dialogue with Islam.¹⁰¹ Cragg's writings and intellectual input into his life at this time helped Hassan to build on the theological training he received at Cambridge, and to expound the Christian faith to intellectuals and the influential people of Isfahan. Many of these sermons were later published in Persian in book form.¹⁰²

8.4 Hassan the bishop

In the 1960's and 70's the small Church in Iran continued to grow and prosper. In 1960 the long-serving Bishop Thompson, his father-in-law, announced his intention to retire. The diocese at this time was still under the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and after wide consultation it was decided to propose the appointment of bishop to Hassan rather than bring in for an interim period a retired bishop unfamiliar with the Persian language.¹⁰³ He accepted this and was duly consecrated in St George's Cathedral, Jerusalem, because 'the Archbishop in Jerusalem was still

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ H.B. Dehqani-Tafti *design of my world: Pilgrimage to Christianity*, first published 1959, second edition, pub. The Seabury Press, New York, 1982. It is this edition which is being quoted in this Chapter.

¹⁰¹ Republished in 2000, reprinted in 2004 and 2008, pub. Oneworld, Oxford

¹⁰² See *The Hard Awakening* p. 25. This book, *The Hard Awakening: The Bishop in Iran*, pub SPCK, 1981, was written by Hassan as a sequence to his other two books, used above. It describes in more detail the events of the Islamic Revolution and his subsequent life in exile in England.

¹⁰³ See *The Unfolding Design of My World, op.cit.*, p. 151.

nominally accountable to Canterbury’, explains Hassan.¹⁰⁴ His rather understated reaction was as follows: ‘So it came about that I was called to the utmost trust the Church has, the Church that I had so long before pledged to serve till death. I could only ask the Council members to stand and pray for me in the fulfilment of that sacred pledge.’¹⁰⁵

Around 1975 it was decided that a new Province of Jerusalem and the Middle East should be created, separate from Canterbury. This province was to be made up of four dioceses: Iran, Jerusalem, Egypt, Cyprus and the Gulf, and the President Bishop was to exercise overall jurisdiction. In 1976 the Province was formally inaugurated and Hassan was elected as its President, which meant he had pastoral care for a very large area. About this development he says:

This new provincial dimension to my tasks was a heavy trust, entailing a pastoral concern for the whole of the area from far North Africa, Ethiopia, the long Gulf line of States from Muscat to Iraq, the island of Cyprus and the heartlands of Christian history in Palestine, Syria and Lebanon – all to be cherished in Christ in an Anglican fellowship that held each diocese both autonomous and contributory, the entire structure being itself innovative and untried.¹⁰⁶

Meanwhile in Iran, during his time of tenure of this wide area, the new bishop managed to increase considerably the educational facilities, in particular setting up a high school for boys and girls with boarding facilities. ‘It was urgent to take our work beyond primary school level’, he said, and to further this end he obtained funds from the Diocesan Council.¹⁰⁷ There was already in the diocese when Hassan took over a Christian hospital and nursing school. There was also an institute for the welfare of the blind, built up over many years which was ‘a centre for the education and training of blind girls and women’.¹⁰⁸ There was a similar institute for boys; called after ‘Cyrus the Great’; it was a farm project providing ‘training for the blind in keeping poultry, animal husbandry, and agriculture.’¹⁰⁹ One of Hassan’s main duties was to visit and inspect these institutions, as well as the other churches in different parts of the diocese.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

8.5 Death of Hassan's father

Hassan's father died in 1970 during his tenure as bishop. It was a very painful event for him on a personal level, but it was his reception in his home village that demonstrated how deep the rift had become with his family since his conversion. On hearing the news of his father's death, Hassan went to Taft with all speed, but, he reports: 'Instead of offering solace to a community in grief, my arrival caused disquiet to my brother, Yahya. He intimated that as they had already buried my father, my coming was unnecessary. He was insistent that I should go back to Isfahan.'¹¹⁰

His brother then foresaw difficulties about Hassan's presence at the traditional third-day service following death. Hassan insisted that he must be there, but in the event he discovered that his brother had called local religious leaders to the home to prevent him. Hassan describes this situation as follows:

I found myself confronted by a dozen turbaned men who were unanimous in their verdict that my presence in the mosque would be intolerable. It was the mosque I had attended as a child...There was a deep anger in me when their leader recommended that I swallow my humiliation and return home forthwith. So I went and stood for a while by the door of the mosque in prayer and loving recollection of my father.¹¹¹

It is remarkable that this father, whom Hassan obviously loved, had not been quite so unbending as these mullahs and allowed himself to be persuaded, albeit with difficulty, in the matter of Hassan's education in Christian schools. Soon the effects of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 were to override this and all other difficulties in Hassan's life and ministry.

9 The Islamic Revolution

The Ayatollah Khomeini, the inspiration and architect of the Islamic Republic which came into existence in 1979, began by protesting, whilst teaching at the theological seminary of Qum, against the ruler Reza Shah's unpopular reforms. The Shah, it would seem, had moved too quickly with his reforms, dismissing older men around him who might have given him wise advice and surrounding himself with younger men who flattered him. His biggest mistake, according to Hassan, was to send Khomeini into exile, from where he sent printed bulletins back to Iran to build up

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 177/8.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

support for his movement. These came even to Christians reminding them of their long-standing ties with Islam, and asking them to rise up against oppression. Khomeini managed to return to Iran on 1st February 1979, where revolutionaries who had broken into army arsenals helped themselves to weapons and joined him. When he was sufficiently in control of the situation Khomeini dissolved the Iranian parliament, and most people 'sincerely believed that now the country would be free from dictatorship and oppression.'¹¹² Hassan at this time shared these sentiments, even sending a letter of support and congratulation to the new government in Iran, but he would soon realise his mistake.

9.1 Murder and robbery in the Church

The situation for the Church quickly began to deteriorate. The first ominous sign was the brutal murder of Arastoo Syah, a senior priest of the Diocese, pastor of the church in Shiraz in the south of the country, apparently by two prospective Christians whom he had been instructing. This happened in the first week of the Revolution.¹¹³ In the second week men calling themselves members of the 'Revolutionary Committee' entered the hospital at Isfahan and confiscated all stocks of Christian literature. On their next visit they announced that they had been assigned by the Committee to supervise the administration of the hospital. A month later the hospital in Shiraz met with the same fate.¹¹⁴ Eventually both hospitals were completely taken over by the rebels despite the fact that the one in Shiraz was 'endowment land', *waqf*, which under Islamic law is regarded as almost holy and must not be interfered with.¹¹⁵

The self-styled officials who took over these institutions demanded access to the bank accounts and usually succeeded in obtaining the money they wanted from the bank, but in fact it was not a great deal; only sufficient for the daily running of the hospitals. However in the course of their investigations they discovered that another account existed, the Diocesan Trust Fund, which

¹¹² *The Hard Awakening, op.cit.*, p. 14.. See pp. 1-14 for a fuller description of these events.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 37/38. The perpetrators of the crime were never caught.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹¹⁵ The Shiraz Christian Hospital, started in 1922, stood on land donated and endowed for the purpose by one of the wealthy families of Shiraz. One of the grievances of the Khomeini movement was that the Shah had tampered with such endowment lands. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

was the financial backbone of the Diocese and had grown to a very large sum. It contained, for instance, the severance pay and pensions for about two hundred employees and was held in the name of the current bishop who alone could sign for its withdrawal. The new 'owners' of the hospital could not access this Fund through the bank so they came to Hassan and demanded he hand it over. His answer was simple: 'They had acted unjustly and illegally in taking over *waqf* property by force' and, 'I was not in a position to hand over to anyone Trust money which legally belonged to the diocese.'¹¹⁶ He therefore consistently refused their request.

9.2 Attempts on Hassan's life

The next disaster, a preliminary to a serious attempt on Hassan's life, happened on 29 August. Thirty men burst into the bishop's house and thoroughly ransacked it, taking away family photos, letters, file copies of the monthly pastoral letter including the names and addresses of recipients. Two weeks later an anonymous message was received: 'We looted your house, we tried to frighten you, but you have not gone away. We shall be back!'¹¹⁷ Hassan merely comments, 'It is amazing how one can get used to a succession of disasters.'¹¹⁸

How did Hassan manage to face this and subsequent trials with equanimity? The answer may possibly be found in what he tells us about a mysterious illness he had three months into the Revolution. He describes it as follows:

The tension and perplexity made me ill. I spent three weeks in bed with a high fever. The clinical diagnosis was obvious enough: stress had prostrated me. The body had answered the weight on the soul. Medicine itself did not heal me but a new infilling of the love of God, and peace that only a new sense of God's presence could bestow. The God of love was the antidote to my anxiety about the future, and enabled me to endure the present.¹¹⁹

This illness gave Hassan time to ponder strategy in case worse was to come, which of course it was.

One thing became very clear to him, and that was that '[w]e Christians would have to remain true to our faith whatever the cost.'¹²⁰ In other words there could be no policy of *taqieyh*, 'tactical

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45/6.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹¹⁹ *Unfolding Design of My World, op.cit.*, p. 190/1.

¹²⁰ *The Hard Awakening, op.cit.*, p. 103.

dissimulation'.¹²¹ There is no such doctrine in Christianity, he said, because 'Christ was almost ruthless about being and showing who you are'.¹²² Hassan confesses to being greatly helped at this time by a book by Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons*, which tells the story of Thomas More, Chancellor of England, who did not yield to the pressures put on him by the King, Henry VIII, but stood up for what he believed to be right and was martyred as a consequence.¹²³

Inevitably Hassan thought about death at this time, knowing full well that his own life was in danger. On this subject he writes: 'It came to me that death is a gift from God, that when it comes one has to accept it with gratitude, and not with terror and fear, because it is only through death that we can be really and completely liberated from our twisted personalities.'¹²⁴ And in his diary just after his illness, he wrote: 'In these few days I have found out in a clear way that I have to leave fear behind and carry on with my duties as usual ... if there are people who want to kill me, they will do so, but if God wants me to live, I will survive. The important thing is to continue God's work with utmost loyalty to the end.'¹²⁵

After this events moved quickly. A member of the so-called Revolutionary Committee called upon Hassan and again demanded that he hand over the Church Trust Fund. Again he refused. He was threatened with arrest, and the next day members of this 'Committee' did indeed come and take him away. He found himself, after a short period of detention, in a large yard where

¹²¹ I quote from a letter of Margaret Dehqani-Tafti of 7 July 2011, 'In the Persian/English dictionary it gives the meaning as *dissimulation, deception, misrepresentation, hypocrisy, pretence, double-dealing, be cautious in matters of religion*. Sadly this attitude and thinking is very ingrained in Persian society, obviously coming from the Shi'ite belief that you have the right to hide the truth if it is to your advantage. That is why there is so little trust among Persians as they will always suspect the 'other' of not telling the truth. At the start of the Revolution families who would speak against the government at home because they did not agree with them, would tell their children not to say what their parents thought at school because it would be dangerous for them. So it was instilled in children very early on, and no doubt goes on and will go on. The Church indeed had to grapple with this, and that may well be the reason why we lost so many enquirers when they found they could not deal with the attitude of openness in society.'

¹²² *The Hard Awakening* p. 104.

¹²³ *Ibid.* Ironically Thomas More was a Catholic fighting for what he saw to be the true faith against Henry who was to break away from the Roman Church and make himself Head of what became known as the Anglican Church, in which Hassan held a position of high authority. It probably illustrates the point that for a convert being a Christian *per se* is more important than belonging to a particular denomination. Similarly when as a young man he went to the Second World Youth Conference, he was 'stunned' when all the participants of different denominations could not receive communion together. [Unfolding Design p102/3]

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 104/5.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

young gunmen were standing around. Unbeknown to him this was the place used for public execution by firing squad. However news of his disappearance had spread quickly and action was taken just in time. Providentially also foreign reporters arrived, one from *The Daily Telegraph*, to find out what was going on and his captors, obviously discomfited, let him go, but not before he had been dragged before a 'court hearing, still in his bishop's cassock'. He reports that 'he kept quite calm while he answered them'.¹²⁶ The sequence to this was a surprise attempt on his life during the night when he was sleeping, which happened as follows: In the early hours of Friday morning, 26th October, Hassan opened his eyes to see a revolver pointed at him less than a foot away. Then he heard five or six shots. Simultaneously his wife threw herself over his body in a gesture of protection, after which she pursued the intruders as they ran away. When she returned her left hand was streaming with blood; it had been in the path of one of the bullets intended for her husband, who incredibly was not hurt at all. However his pillow was pierced with four neat holes in a semi-circle round where his head had been.¹²⁷ Needless to say the perpetrators of this crime were never caught.

9.3 Death of Hassan's son, Bahram

Shortly after this attempt on his life, Hassan set off with his wife for Cyprus where he had to attend a meeting in his role as President Bishop. Bahram their son saw them off at the airport; little did they know that this was the last time they would see him. His passport continued to be withheld so that he could not leave the country. The only reason the authorities would give for this refusal was that he would not persuade his father to hand over the Diocesan Trust Money.¹²⁸ His murder was the final blow which resulted in Hassan and his family being forced to live in exile in England.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ *Unfolding Design of my World, op.cit.*, p. 195.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 196, *The Hard Awakening* p. 60-61. This pillow was kept and brought to England, and was shown to me by Margaret Dehqani-Tafti.

¹²⁸ *Unfolding Design of My World. Op.cit.*, p. 199.

¹²⁹ It may have looked as if he fled but, said his wife: 'That was one point that he was very strong about – that he did not flee. He came out of Iran quite legally and had every intention of going back but took advice which we hoped would be short-term. Certainly for the first year (1980-1981) we thought we would be returning.... At least it meant that he remained alive to continue his work as Bishop till 1990 when he had to officially retire.' From a letter of Margaret Dehqani-Tafti, 1 December 2010.

Little that is known of what happened except the following few details. Margaret, Hassan's wife, had returned to Iran while Hassan remained in Cyprus at his meeting. He was awoken at 11.30 at night to take a phone call from his brother-in-law in London who announced bluntly, 'It's about Bahram. He was shot and he is dead.' Apparently Bahram had been driving home from the college where he was a teacher in the early afternoon, when two men in a car drove in front of him forcing him to stop. A young boy who happened to be passing saw the two cars and a man talking to Bahram in his car. Shots were heard and the two men drove off in their car. The boy alerted the police and the body of Bahram was taken to a nearby hospital.¹³⁰ The first thing Hassan did after receiving this news was to write to his wife. Two sentences stand out; the first reminiscent of the Book of Job which meant so much to him at the time of his spiritual crisis at Cambridge University: 'May God give us strength to bear this tragedy for his glory. Whatever I have is from God and so I am happy to give him back whatever he has kindly given'.¹³¹ The second sentence, 'May God forgive the murderers of our son, because obviously they did not know what they were doing', recalls Jesus' words from the Cross as described in the Gospels.¹³²

10. Exile and death in England

The rest of Hassan's story is quickly told. The final chapter of his book *The Unfolding Design of My World* is given the title 'Good-bye, Beloved Country' which intimates to his readers that although he has left Iran and its troubles far behind, the cost of living in exile should not be underestimated. As Bishop John V. Taylor remarks in his Foreword to this book:

There can be no doubt that the past nineteen years have been a heart-rending exile for Bishop Hassan... The cruellest irony of the Revolutionary Committee's insinuations that they (Christians) represented hostile foreign interests lies in the fact that Hassan is so ineradicably and passionately Persian.¹³³

It was through the good offices and friendship of Bishop Taylor that Hassan eventually became an Assistant Bishop at Winchester Cathedral. His family was also given accommodation and from here

¹³⁰ *The Hard Awakening* p. 76.

¹³¹ See Job Ch.1:22.

¹³² See Luke Ch.23:34 The letter is quoted in *The Hard Awakening* p. 78.

¹³³ *Unfolding Design, op.cit.,* p. ix.

he was able to continue to minister in some measure to the Christian church he had left behind in Iran.¹³⁴

Hassan Dehqani-Tafti died in April 2008. He is buried in 'Paradise', the final resting place of the Bishops of Winchester in the beautiful grounds of the cathedral. On his tombstone he is designated as a 'Confessor of the Faith', and there is also inscribed in Persian the text of Ephesians Ch.2:19, 'No longer stranger or sojourner but fellow citizen with the saints.' And finally in English, 'Dust of the high plains of Persia in the earth of an English Shire.'¹³⁵ However his pectoral cross has now been framed and returned to the church he loved in Isfahan; a memorial of the past, but also a hopeful pledge for the future?¹³⁶

11 Conclusion

When writing biography, whether sacred or secular, one is treading on holy ground. This is very evident in Hassan's case, as also that of Jean-Mohammed Abd-el -Jalil who forms the subject of the next chapter. The two biographies have some features in common, for instance the severe effects of forceful separation from culture and family demanded by the circumstances of conversion, but in other respects they are very different, perhaps particularly in view of the fact that Hassan will write for Muslims or converts to Christianity, and Jean-Mohammed for Christians. An analysis of the writings of both will follow in Chapters Six and Seven.

¹³⁴ As General Secretary of the Church Missionary Society, John V Taylor would be entertained by Hassan when he visited Iran. See *Unfolding Design*, p. 163.

¹³⁵ *Hassan Barnaba Dehqani-Tafti 1920-2008*, a Memorial Book put together by Margaret, his wife, published by Sohrab Books, 2010

¹³⁶ The cross was framed, with an explanation, by his wife Margaret, and returned to St Luke's Church, Isfahan, by Mr. Cecil Madhukar. Notice in a Christmas/New Year message, 2011, from Margaret Dehqani-Tafti.

CHAPTER 5

JEAN-MOHAMMED ABD-EL-JALIL

1 Introduction

The two converts that I have chosen to study, Hassan Barnaba Dehqani-Tafti and Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, perhaps especially the latter, have lived Islam fervently from the inside without any thought of leaving it behind. Admittedly Hassan did have a Christian mother, but she died when he was only five years old; all the other members of his family, and indeed the whole village where he lived, were Shia Muslim. He is unusual in that against all odds, since it was contrary to the will of his father and the prevailing Muslim culture, he was educated in Christian schools by missionaries. He did not choose Christianity for himself till he was a teenager. Nevertheless Islam was his matrix, absorbed and lived from early childhood, and as a bishop it was his mission to minister to a small Christian church in Iran. Jean-Mohammed, on the other hand, had a completely Sunni Muslim background and education in his native city of Fès, Morocco. He only really knew Christianity as a foreigner in a foreign land, whereas Hassan, who was passionately Persian, was fortunate to experience his Christianity as something profoundly embedded in his own culture. Indeed he made a point of it being so, resisting all attempts by his compatriots to consider him a 'foreigner' in his own country because of what they perceived as his 'Western faith'¹ It was only when he finally had to live in exile that he discovered that Christianity transcends cultural boundaries, and it gave him strength to live in exile from his beloved homeland. This is a lesson that Jean-Mohammed had to learn straight away. It was only as a young man in France that he discovered Christianity; from the start it was a faith in exile, not embedded in his culture as Hassan's had been. This was undoubtedly a great strain for him, not lessened by the fact that he did not

¹ In the context of the great suffering caused by the taking over of all the Christian institutions he had so patiently built up in Iran, he said 'Christian faith demands the utmost participation in the culture of one's birth, for all within that culture has made it historically what it is and what it will remain.' *The Unfolding Design of My World*, pp. 230-31. See also, for instance, in 'Excerpts from *Iran Diocesan Association Publications*, 1960-1973, pp. 56-57 (Issue no.10, 1973), published in a privately circulated Memorial Book compiled by his wife and daughters, pub. Sohrab Books 2010. This has been confirmed also by conversations with his family who were with him in Iran.

marry but went on to become a celibate Franciscan priest. Perhaps due to these circumstances his life was always characterised by a certain fragility, which will become evident as we explore his life story.

2 The Sources

Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil (he only prefixed his name with 'Jean' when he became a Franciscan) was born in Morocco in 1904 and died in France in 1979. For any knowledge of his personal life between these two dates we are indebted to the painstaking work of Françoise Jacquin, and Maurice Borrmans (a Missionary of Africa, formerly 'White Fathers') who at the time of writing was resident at the Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islam, in Rome), who have gathered together his letters and published them in two volumes, which is particularly valuable since Jean-Mohammed himself spoke little about his personal life.² Maurice Borrmans has also compiled a small book containing the one short piece of autobiography written by Jean-Mohammed himself, as well as various recollections of people who knew him, and a few letters to himself³ He has also written a book about Jean-Mohammed along with three others whom he considers to be prophets of the dialogue of Christianity with Islam, namely, Louis Massignon, Louis Gardet, and Georges Anawati.⁴ The main source for the first half of this chapter is the correspondence of Jean-Mohammed with his friend and fellow convert Paul Mehmet Mulla -Zadé, which allows us to follow the process of his conversion, both his struggles along the way and the joy of discovery. For the second half of the chapter which deals with his life as a Franciscan, his academic career, the spiritual crisis which culminated in a potentially disastrous trip back to Morocco, and the final fifteen years of his life when he suffered greatly from the effects of cancer of the tongue, the following will be used: the books he wrote to facilitate the dialogue of non-Muslims with Islam; these are *L'Islam et Nous*

² *Mulla-Zadé et Abd-el-Jalil: Deux frères en conversion Du Coran à Jésus, Correspondance 1927-1957, rassemblée, introduite et annotée par Maurice Borrmans*, Les Editions du Cerf, Paris 2009, (Henceforth *Mulla-Zadé*), and *Massignon/Abd-el-Jalil; Parrain et filleul, 1926-1962, Correspondance rassemblée et annotée par Françoise Jacquin, Préface par Maurice Borrmans*, Les Editions du Cerf, Paris 2007.

³ *Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, Témoin du Coran et de l'Évangile*, Les Editions du Cerf; Les Editions franciscaines, Paris 2004 (Henceforth *Témoin*).

⁴ Maurice Borrmans, *Prophètes du dialogue Islamo-chrétien; Louis Massignon, Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, Louis Gardet, Georges C. Anawati*, Les Editions du Cerf, Paris 2009 (Henceforth *Prophètes*).

(1938), and *Aspects intérieurs de l'Islam* (1949) some notes and lectures from the *Institut catholique*, the Catholic University of Paris, where he taught from 1936-1964; and finally his brief return to Morocco as recorded by a friend, Alfred-Louis de Prémare.⁵

3 Life as a young man in Morocco and France

Morocco, where Mohammed was born in 1904, was at that time a French protectorate. His forbears came originally from Andalusia, but had been in Morocco for four centuries.⁶ Mohammed's father, to whom he was greatly attached, has been described as the *calife* of the *pacha* of Fèz, which suggests a high ranking government official.⁷ Mohammed himself only says that he came from a 'poor but honourable family', which was nevertheless very pious and observed strictly the Muslim faith and all its customs.⁸ This included making the pilgrimage to Mecca with his parents in 1913/14 when he would be only nine years old.⁹ In a letter to his friend Mulla-Zadé we discover further that his father had more than ten children, only three of whom survived; these being himself, his younger brother Omar, and a younger sister.

3.1 A painful father/son relationship

His father had a particular affection for Mohammed, perhaps especially because as a child he had been seriously ill for some years and had to have several operations (he does not say what for).¹⁰ He also said that his father had a particular fondness for him since, in contrast to his younger brother, he was strongly inclined to piety. There is no doubt that this affection was reciprocated, in the strong bonds that Mohammed had for all his family. And as he was drawn to Christianity these did not lessen, but by his own admission grew stronger, which made the final break all the more painful.¹¹ This strengthening of affection could be attributed to the fact that he knew he was always

⁵ *Le Retour de Jean-Mohammed Abdeljalil au Maroc*, in *En Hommage au Père Jacques Jomier* op, Paris, Editions du Cerf, 2002, pp. 321-341.

⁶ *Prophètes* p. 54.

⁷ This is a recollection of someone who knew him well in France, Mlle Faguer, as confided to Maurice Borrman, *Témoin*, p. 59.

⁸ From his own mini-biography, *Témoignage d'un tard-venu à l'Eglise*. See *Témoin* p. 18.

⁹ *Prophètes* p55

¹⁰ *Mulla-Zadé* p. 30, in a letter dated 22 October 1927.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

going to be separated from his family, since he was going to live in a permanent state of exile in France (he never assumed French citizenship). Arguably it could also be partly attributed to a growing sense of the reality of being 'in Christ', that phrase which is scattered throughout St Paul's epistles; it is a Christian reality which can deepen not only family bonds, but those with every human being, and indeed the whole of creation.¹² Whatever the reason, however, there is no doubt that the grief his conversion caused his father was a lifelong sorrow which he frequently refers to in his letters to Mulla-Zadé. In one letter, for instance, he confesses that 'some of his letters have broken my heart, and many times I have had to rush to church to offer to the Lord, with my tears, the fragile pieces of my heart.'¹³ It is in this context that he makes a very rare negative reference to Muslims, that is, that 'my father and the majority of Moroccan Muslims do not know the meaning of tolerance.'¹⁴ Unfortunately his fellow Moroccan students in Paris made matters worse by reporting to his family that he was 'mad'. Mohammed's father wrote demanding that his son should return home, but he steadfastly refused. However he admitted to Mulla-Zadé that this particular letter caused him acute distress; a distress heightened by the fact that his father was seemingly inconsolable and wrote to him every day.¹⁵ He wrote to his father henceforth every Sunday, but as time went by he received no reply. His brother Omar, who respected his decision to convert to Christianity and kept in contact all his life, wrote to him to confirm the rupture with their father.¹⁶

3.2 Further education in Morocco and France

Ironically it was his beloved father who unwittingly created the circumstances that would lead to his son's conversion to Christianity. It happened as follows: when Mohammed's early formation in a 'Koranic school' was completed, his father did not want him, or Omar, to go to a secular school, so he sent them to the Franciscan *École Charles de Foucauld* in Rabat, on condition

¹² To give one example among many; 'the peace of God which is beyond our understanding will guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus.' (Philippians 4:7 NJB). For a full discussion see James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, T.&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1998, Ch.15 *Participation in Christ*, pp. 390-412.

¹³ *Mulla-Zadé* p. 114, letter dated 30 April 1928.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49, in a letter dated 15 November, 1927.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 107, in a letter dated 18th April.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 123, in a letter dated 6 June 1928, to Mulla-Zadé reporting the contents of the letter from his brother.

that the Muslim identity of the boys be respected.¹⁷ It was the headmaster, Père Clément Etienne, who became something of a confidant and father figure to Mohammed, and was to be instrumental in having him and Omar sent to France for further study. Noticing how gifted Mohammed in particular was, he brought him to the attention of Marshall Lyautey,¹⁸ insisting that he should be encouraged towards higher studies in Paris. In due course this came about, the two brothers being sent together. Omar did in fact become the Minister of Agriculture in the newly independent Morocco, but for Mohammad the future did not unfold at all as planned. It was Père Clément, the headmaster, who found accommodation for Mohammed in France through the kind instrumentality of good friends of his who may well have been influential in the matter of the young student's change of faith.¹⁹ In any case they certainly gave him a sympathetic environment.

In his own short biographical sketch Mohammed recounts how he was given a government grant by special recommendation of Lyautey, the Resident General, which obliged him to obtain a degree in the Arabic language for the purpose of teaching, although he was personally more drawn to philosophy. He was not content, however, with only the courses at the Sorbonne and managed to obtain special permission to study at the *Institut Catholique*, the Catholic University of Paris, despite the fact that he was not only a strict Muslim, but hostile to all forms of Christianity; though he was honest enough to admit that he understood it only superficially.²⁰ He has given more information about this (obviously not meant for the public domain) which is that his purpose was to study Christianity in its own citadel in order to find new arguments to combat it.²¹ We learn moreover from Père Clément, who knew his family, that he was a disciple of a certain Sheik Mohammed Abdou

¹⁷ The details of his schooling are confused; this is information given to Maurice Borrmans by Roger Devouge, whose family found lodgings for Mohammed, see *Témoin* p55. However the Franciscan headmaster of this school, Père Clément Etienne, wrote in a letter to Mulla-Zadé that he only lodged there, at his own request, but he daily attended the state school, the *lycée Gouroud*. See Mulla-Zadé, p. 259.

¹⁸ Hubert Lyautey (1854-1934), the first Resident General in Morocco, which office he held 1912-1925.

¹⁹ This information was given to Maurice Borrmans by Roger Devouge, son of Mme Devouge who became Mohammed's godmother at his baptism. He recalls how his father (now dead) and Père Clément had been wartime friends. It was they who found him accommodation; they were all staunch Catholics. See *Témoin* p. 56.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p22.

²¹ Information given to some young Franciscans after his entry into the Order. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

(1849-1905), and along with many other young Moroccans, a follower of the wahhabite movement.²²

What then, brought about so great a change in him? A staunch Muslim and a highly gifted student, he was among a few élite young men whom Lyautey had in mind to take over the reins of a future independent Moroccan government, and Mohammed was seemingly happy with this prospect. In fact he confided to the daughter of his landlady in Paris that he was destined to be the private tutor of the future Sultan's children.²³ He was to be in the Faguer household, living as a member of the family, for two years, so they got to know him quite well. Mlle Marguerite Faguer has recalled how he said at table one day, 'I know of a few Christians who have become Muslims, but for a Muslim to convert to Christianity – that is impossible.'²⁴ It must have been a considerable shock to his system when this very thing happened in his own life not long afterwards.

4 Conversion

The 'context', according to Lewis Rambo's 'sequential stage model' of conversion as described in chapter three of thesis is now in place. Rambo also posits that conversion is normally triggered, or at least encouraged, by significant encounters. There are several in the case of Jean-Mohammed; these being his instructors at the *Institut Catholique*, Louis Massignon and Jacques Maritain before his conversion, and Paul Mehmet Mulla-Zadé as he progressed towards baptism. Their various roles in the process will become clear as Jean-Mohammed's story unfolds.

Mohammed's conversion to all appearances was very sudden and unexpected, but in fact it could be argued that there was a certain amount of preparation, or at the very least favourable circumstances that helped facilitate so great a change. He had of course been following courses in Christian theology etc. at the *Institut catholique*, and among his teachers were the famous Louis Massignon and the philosopher Jacques Maritain, both of whom attracted him greatly. Massignon

²² In a letter to Mulla-Zadé, in *Mulla-Zadé* p. 260. A footnote further explains that it was the fundamentalist teaching of Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al Wahhâb (1703-1791), who inspired this movement, which became the official doctrine of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

²³ This was Mlle Marguerite Faguer, the daughter of Mme Faguer. See *Témoign* p. 58.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

in fact was to become his godfather at his baptism, but his relationship with Maritain unfortunately came under some strain.²⁵ It was not these eminent professors, however, who persuaded him to convert to Christianity, though it is likely that along with the sympathetic hosts with whom he was lodging, they played their part. He himself compares his experience to St Paul, and that in two ways: like Paul he had been very hostile in his attitude to Christianity; and his conversion experience, like Paul's, had a certain 'out of the blue' character, though in both cases whether this was actually the case can be questioned.²⁶ The possible influence of Mohammed's Catholic hosts, his studies and the Catholic professors who taught him have been mentioned; in a comparable way St Paul was living a disciplined, God-orientated life as a Pharisee, and may well have been influenced by the martyr Stephen's Christ-like death by stoning, at which he was reputedly present.²⁷

The actual event of Mohammed's conversion unfolded as follows: on Christmas night in 1926 he attended the traditional Catholic midnight mass with Mlle Marguerite Faguer and her mother, his landlady Mme Faguer. Marguerite has described what happened as '*foudroyante*' (like lightning), adding that his decision to become a Christian was taken very quickly with no hesitation or doubt.²⁸ It would appear that at some stage during the mass the celebrant led a procession to the crib where symbolically the congregation would pay homage to the newly born infant Jesus, as they brought to mind the actual event of his birth in Bethlehem two thousand years ago. Mohammed was observed spontaneously to join this procession.²⁹ As has been noted, he was always very reserved about his spiritual life, but he did speak about this event a little, as the anniversary approached, in a letter to his friend and confidant Paul Mehmet Mulla-Zadé. His decision was taken, he wrote, 'at the feet of the Infant God, with tears and a full heart.' He felt strongly that this Child

²⁵ This was because he tried to influence him too much, first by making him read the whole of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, which he could not get on with, then by trying to persuade him to become a Dominican or a Jesuit; Orders which had a more 'intellectual' bent than the Franciscans. Jean-Mohammed dwells at length on other difficulties in his mini-biography. However he retained a lifelong affection for him, *Témoin* pp. 20-33.

²⁶ His admission of hostility has been recalled by young Franciscans to whom he spoke, as likewise his comparing himself with St Paul, *Témoin* p. 66.

²⁷ Acts of the Apostles 7:55-60.

²⁸ *Témoin* p. 59.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

wanted him for himself, and he was, he said, 'full of joy and loved him passionately.'³⁰ This was obviously some kind of mystical experience which could not adequately be put into words, but it is striking to note that the God he perceived as calling him appeared under the form of a small and vulnerable child in extremely humble circumstances; a total contrast to the God he would have been familiar with as a Muslim. In Islam God is always utterly transcendent, great, with no admixture of anything human.³¹ This 'sudden' conversion, as already noted, may not have been as sudden as it appeared, though undoubtedly it *was* so on the level of his emotions. His response was also immediate; his heart was totally committed and faith was instantly awakened on a deep level. However it took some time for his reason to catch up with his faith, and in this too a comparison can be made with St Paul who after his conversion experience, as a result of which his life had been turned upside down, spent three years in Arabia.³² He needed time to absorb and come to terms with what had happened, and it is highly likely that it was during this 'desert experience' that his great theological themes were germinating. Mohammed's life too was undergoing a profound change, and he could not discard overnight the firmly held convictions which as a Muslim had been part of him from early childhood. He struggled with what Islam had taught him to believe without question and it was some time before he was ready to take the definitive step of asking for baptism in the Catholic Church. We are fortunate therefore to have available the volume of his correspondence with the Turkish convert Paul Mehmet Mulla-Zadé which allows us to trace something of his transition from Islam to Christianity.

4.1 The Abd-el-Jalil/Mulla-Zadé correspondence

Paul-Mehmet Mulla-Zadé, born in Ottoman Crete in 1881, was twenty three years older than Mohammed and already a priest and professor of Islamology in Rome when they were put in contact with each other. This happened through the instrumentality of Père Clément, Mohammed's former headmaster in Rabat. The exchange of letters which ensued is deep and rich; a record not

³⁰ In a letter dated 23 December 1928, *Mulla-Zadé* p. 147.

³¹ See, for instance, Kenneth Cragg's commentary on the muezzin's daily call to prayer, in *The Call of the Minaret*, Ch.2, *God, there is none save he*, pp. 29-60.

³² See his letter to the Galatians Ch.1:16-18.

only of two men from Islam facing together the doctrinal difficulties of Christianity and the problems of living in a totally new culture far from their families, but also of a very engaging spiritual friendship between two manifestly holy men. Interesting as this may be, the present study must confine itself specifically to the exchanges about Mohammed's conversion to Christianity. Maurice Borrmans claims in his Introduction that by their own admission the conversion of these men owed nothing to proselytism, but that in both cases it was solely the result of a long intellectual search. The latter part of this assertion is undoubtedly substantially true; the intellectual search was very earnest, but as has been noted above, there may well have been a little subtle 'proselytising' going on at the *Institut Catholique*. Christianity is after all, intrinsically missionary in character as is Islam.

It is remarkable to note also in this correspondence that there is barely any trace of depreciative language about Islam; they both cared too much about what they had left behind and longed to bridge the great gulf of misunderstanding between Christianity and Islam. They had a deep love for all Muslims, but especially for their families whom they knew endured much pain on their behalf.

4.1.1 Doctrinal struggles; Muhammad and Jesus etc.

Mohammed's first letter is not written until 1st October 1927, some ten months after his conversion experience at midnight mass the previous Christmas. During that time he was at the *Institut Catholique* and no doubt reading avidly. He began his letter by stating that before January of that year (1927) he thought no Muslim would have cause to change his religion, but now his Muslim convictions were shaken. He was seriously studying the Catholic religion, he said, beginning with the relevant sacred texts.³³ This seemed to him the obvious place to start his enquiry, which immediately confronted him with the Muslim doctrine of *tahrif*; the 'falsification' of their Scriptures by Jews and Christians. This is a very problematic area of dialogue which will be discussed in the next chapter of thesis. For Mohammed, the immediate issue was that he believed, rightly, that he

³³ Perhaps in today's ecumenical climate one needs to make an apology for Mohammed's constant use of the term 'Catholic religion': it needs to be born in mind that he was writing in predominantly Catholic France, well before the ecumenical movement, especially evident at Vatican II, had really manifested itself.

could not accept anything about Christianity if the Scriptures were not reliable. He gives to Mulla-Zadé a list of several books he has been reading around this subject.³⁴ He comes to the conclusion that there is no falsification, as he understands the matter. But what, he asks, of the Qur'anic assertions to the contrary, and those of the most competent authorities in the Muslim world? He goes on to say, moreover, that as a result of his reading he has reached the conclusion that Christianity is superior to the religion he has been practicing, chiefly on account of the superior morality and sanctity of its founder. Neither he, nor Mulla-Zadé in his response, spell out what they mean by this, refusing to make facile comparisons between Muhammad and Jesus. Their respect for Islam means they retain their respect for its Prophet. Jean-Mohammed amply demonstrates this by keeping the Prophet's name when he enters the religious life. However, there is a fundamental difference between the two 'founders' which must strike any convert from Islam. Muhammad was undoubtedly a religious man, but he was also a politician and a warrior, occupations not always conducive to holiness. Jesus, according to Christianity, is the Word of God, and everything he did or said on earth, as recorded in the Gospels, manifested the divine – and hence, perhaps, in their eyes, his greater holiness. Moreover, according to Christian doctrine, he willingly laid down his life for the redemption of mankind, which could only be described as 'heroic sanctity' according to the manner of his death. Christianity stands or falls by the person and actions of Jesus Christ, whereas for Islam the Book takes precedence over the man Muhammad. And how, he continues, if one admits the existence of a personal God endowed with every perfection of Wisdom, Goodness and Justice, could this same God permit an error as beautiful as Catholicism?³⁵

However he is still full of doubt, feeling the need to explain the truth of these matters to

³⁴ These include several books by Auguste Joseph Alphonse Gratry (1805-1872), priest, theologian and professor at the Sorbonne, especially *Les Sources* (1868), and *La Philosophie du Credo*, (1861), and by Léonce de Grandmaison (1868-1927), Jesuit and theologian, *La Religion Personelle* (1927), and by Eugène Duplessy (1860-1939), canon of the Chapter of Notre Dame, Paris, *Apologetique* (1924).

³⁵ Many might think they have cause to question such as assertion about Catholicism today. But see, for instance, Karl Rahner's essay, *The Church of Sinners*, in which he makes the point that sin is at the heart of the Church's meaning, and she is made up of sinners from top to bottom. In the end she is compared most beautifully to the woman taken in adultery in John's gospel (Ch.8:1-11).

himself as well as to demonstrate it to others.³⁶ And he can only do this if he comes to believe in the God-Man which for a Muslim, he says, is very difficult. He cites two reasons for his own difficulty, namely his profoundly Muslim education, and the weight of fourteen centuries of Muslim tradition pulling him away from this truth. He asks his correspondent if he can throw any light on his path. In the same context he asks Mulla-Zadé to explain to him what he can of the Trinity. As a doctrine he claims it does not shock or offend him; he simply cannot honestly say that he believes in it.³⁷ Finally he broaches the topic of the mission of Mohammad. He believes him to be sincere, neither an imposter nor subject to hallucinations. What does Mulla-Zadé think? To conclude this first letter he reports that the Scriptures are the backbone of his daily reading. He is most impressed, he says, by St Paul whom he compares to Muhammad, except that Paul has 'more than he has' being, as he sees it, a colossus of faith and charity in action, and one of the strongest arguments in favour of Catholicism.³⁸

4.1.2 Hesitations and doubts

In this first letter Jean-Mohammed has touched on many of the major doctrinal differences between Christianity and Islam; 'falsification' of the Scriptures, the divine/human status of Jesus Christ, the prophethood of Muhammad and his standing in relation to Christianity, and at first it may seem surprising that Mulla-Zadé does not give an immediate response to these urgent questions. He attempts, rather, to meet Mohammed where he is on a more human and spiritual level. Later in a second letter Mohammed confesses to being strongly attached to the 'transcendence' of Christianity and its founder, but at the same time he feels on the edge of a fearful precipice between two worlds, and he is afraid of going forward with too much haste. He has, he says, embarked on a search which engages his whole being, having committed himself to what he knows will be long years of anguish and suffering. (He could not know how true this would prove to be, but he undoubtedly knew great joy and peace as well.) He considers his spiritual formation to be

³⁶ *Mulla-Zadé* p. 16.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17-18.

rudimentary, quite unequal to the task before him. However, he admits that he does sometimes experience a great calm amidst his difficulties, something he has not found in the 'old explanations' (presumably from Islam), and even in the explanations given him by his 'very dear master and friend' Louis Massignon.³⁹

In his first response to Mohammed, Mulla-Zadé rightly puts all the dogmatic difficulties in their proper place. 'Dogmas', he says, are like seeds sown in the soil of our souls in this present life. Nourished by the sap of faith, they are destined to grow towards the light of our future life where they will blossom in flowers of great beauty for our contemplation.' He continued:

The light they shed on our life even now can lead to faith, but they are not to be confused with faith itself, which is something more and something quite other. It consists in catching some of the rays which emanate from that source of light which is revelation; faith is to bathe in that predominantly obscure light. It is essentially to confide oneself to the Inaccessible, the Invisible, the Incomprehensible, who communicates with us by grace under a veil which accommodates itself to our present situation... it enlightens our intelligence so that we can know God and follow him through the shadows of our earthly existence, and so prepare to meet him face to face in heaven.⁴⁰

This is a very well expressed description of faith and the role it plays in relation to reason.

In this first letter to Mohammed, Mulla-Zadé shares much about his own human and spiritual journey to give him encouragement, then simply exhorts him to take the time he needs for his own life-changing decision to mature. He must experience at leisure the new reality of the Church he intends to join. He needs to read the gospel on his knees (at least in spirit) to allow his relationship with Jesus Christ to grow for, he says, the end of all our searching is to be able to abandon ourselves to him who will become our friend, and even more, our new being. 'For me to live is Christ', he says, quoting St Paul.⁴¹ Christian conversion, he continues, is simply to attach oneself with all one's being to Christ, and through him to the intimate life of the Trinity.⁴²

The question of Muhammad the Prophet of Islam is dealt with only briefly in a postscript to the main letter. Mulla-Zadé admits that there is a great deal of controversy about him among

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴¹ Letter to the Galatians, Ch.2:20.

⁴² *Mulla-Zadé* p25.

scholars but for present purposes it is not necessary to pursue these matters. Like Jean-Mohammed, he believes him to have been in good faith, but his doctrine and life do not bear the stamp of transcendent sanctity that he sees in the life and doctrine of Jesus Christ. He speaks of Muhammad's 'mission', in inverted commas, which seems to cast some doubt on its authenticity, though he admits he is not sufficiently abreast of the scholarly debates to make an informed judgement. However, one thing he can say is that the Prophet of Islam's doctrine has been a vehicle of grace and salvation for innumerable Muslims, taking some to the highest levels of contemplation and heroic charity. Nevertheless he considers that both Muhammad and his followers remain in 'invincible ignorance'.⁴³

4.1.3 Towards Baptism: more problems

Largely thanks to this very rich correspondence with his Turkish friend and mentor, Mohammed soon grew sufficiently in his convictions to ask for baptism. For some time yet, however, he kept on struggling to come to terms with difficult Christian doctrines such as the Trinity and the Incarnation, and the crucifixion of Jesus. To help him Mulla-Zadé frequently recounts to him how he experiences these mysteries in his own spiritual life. Mohammed eventually arrived at this dilemma: either Jesus is God and Christianity the Truth, or he is not God and Christianity is a monstrosity.⁴⁴ He used to think, he said, that all these matters were historical problems based on the authenticity (or not) of the Scriptures, and in fact he had secretly hoped to discover that the Christian Gospel was not authentic; a belief that he and all Muslims imbibed with their mother's milk. But it did not take long to come to the contrary conclusion.⁴⁵

According to Lewis Rambo's sequential stage model, discussed above, an important aspect of conversion is that it always has 'consequences'. Here it will be seen that for Mohammed these were quite severe. Fortunately he was able to confide to Mulla-Zadé his immediate practical

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.. Thomas Aquinas made the distinction between ignorance that is 'vincible' and therefore blameworthy, and 'invincible', which is guiltless, *S.Th* 1a 2ae, q. 19, a. 6. See John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition*, p. 193, especially note 60..

⁴⁴ *Mulla-Zadé* p. 47.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

worries, for instance, how was he to tell his father about his conversion, what was he to do with his life as he could not return to Morocco, and not least how to cope financially as his government grant would be stopped. He was given the advice and practical help he needed in all these matters. Mulla-Zadé told him, for instance, about his own very difficult relationship with his father due to his conversion; on what proved to be his final visit to his family home in Turkey, he kissed his father good-bye on his departure, but his youngest brother who had been deputed to take him to the boat on which he was to sail, was instructed to tell him that his father could only curse him so long as he insisted in following his present course.⁴⁶ At a later date, at Mohammed's request, he helped him draft a letter to his own father with the news of his imminent baptism.⁴⁷ Mohammed's financial difficulties were resolved thanks to a certain Monseigneur Eugène Beaupin,⁴⁸ a Catholic activist and author with a particular interest in young people, to whom he applied for help. This enabled him to remain in France and complete his studies, and above all to keep his peace of mind. As Mulla-Zadé commented, 'Divine Providence will not abandon one who has so generously abandoned himself to God. Your brothers in the great Catholic family that you are entering will make up to you for all you are missing from the Protectorate.'⁴⁹

He was also given advice about further reading to aid his spiritual life. This included the spiritual classic *Treatise on the Love of God* by St Francis de Sales, which served to stress that the fundamental charism of Christianity is love; love within the Trinity, then as manifested in the life of Jesus Christ, and then to be shared with all humanity. 'All dogma leads to the one statement; God is love', wrote Mulla-Zadé.⁵⁰ Mohammed was finally baptised in the Franciscan College of Fontenay-sous-bois, near Paris, on 7 April 1928 (Holy Saturday, the day before Easter Sunday). Louis Massignon was his 'godfather', a role he took very seriously as the two grew over the years from mutual respect into close friendship

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 52, in a letter dated 20 Nov.1927.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁴⁸ Eugène Beaupin, (1877-1945), was chaplain to *Jeune Garde*, and 'animator' of *Comité catholique des amitiés françaises* and the *Union catholique d'études internationales*. His books are still available in French.

⁴⁹ *Mulla-Zadé* p. 75. Letter dated 8 January 1928.

⁵⁰ In a letter dated 12 January 1928, *ibid.* p.79.

4.1.4 Jean-Mohammed's mission after baptism

A new phase was beginning in Mohammed's life, but he did not leave his Islam behind. Maurice Borrmans has described him as a 'prophet' in the dialogue with Islam, and so he was if we think of prophecy in the biblical sense of one who not only sees the future but also witnesses and speaks out for what he believes. The prophet goes ahead of the rest of us, as 'one who has been given insight into the world of the divine, which is hidden from the rest of men'.⁵¹

After his conversion, Jean-Mohammed devoted his whole life, insofar as the framework of his Franciscan religious life allowed, to facilitating the dialogue with Islam, not through engaging with it directly, but through his writings, his life as a priest, and the very special prayer called *badaliya* which he learned from his godfather, Louis Massignon. Massignon was ever on the lookout for anything that would make a connection between Christianity and Islam, and *badaliya* served that purpose very well for him. The Arabic word *badal*, (substitution), originally meant literally taking the place of another who had fallen on the field of battle or deserted the army. Deriving from this, certain Islamic traditions taught that the world owed its salvation to the presence of *Abdal*, that is, men and women who by their sanctity turned away from humanity the evils that threatened them from Satan or the vengeful justice of God.⁵² However it was through his study of the Sufi mystic Al-Hallaj (d.922) that Massignon appropriated the idea more deeply.⁵³ It was in the context of the Sufi mystic's life that he came across the Arabic word *badal* which means 'the acceptance and endurance of the sufferings of another'. The idea became the focus of a movement founded in Damietta, Egypt, by Massignon and his Egyptian Melchite friend, Mary Kahil.⁵⁴ The

⁵¹ Johannes Schildenberger, in *Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology*, entry on *Prophecy*. Pub. Sheed & Ward, London 1970. Prophecy is an area which will need some investigation later as Christians and Muslims see it rather differently. This is particularly the case as it concerns the Prophet Muhammad. Can Christians accept him as a genuine prophet?

⁵² Louis Massignon, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane*, Vrin, 1954, p. 132, as quoted by Jacques Keryell in *Louis Massignon: L'Hospitalité Sacrée*, nouvelle cité, Paris, 1987, p. 389.

⁵³ For Massignon, Al-Hallaj was a Christ-like figure, with whom he developed a very personal relationship. He believed it to be largely through his influence that he returned to the practice of the Catholicism which in his youth he had abandoned.

⁵⁴ For Mary's part in the story see Keryell, op.cit. pp. 79-132. For a full account of the origins of the movement, see *Louis Massignon: Badaliya au nom de l'autre (1947-1962)*, présenté et annoté par Maurice Borrmans et Françoise Jacquin, Les Editions du Cerf, Paris 2011.

foundation was very much influenced by the fact that it was in Damietta where St Francis had his famous encounter with the Sultan Malik-al-Kamil during the Crusades, when he tried to convert him to Christianity⁵⁵ and in this same spirit Christians who were minorities in Muslim lands would pray for their fellow countrymen, and beyond that for all Muslims. Although the *Badaliya* meetings took place in Cairo, Jean-Mohammed, resident in Paris, was fully involved spiritually, and in fact it was through him that his godfather came into close contact with the Franciscan spirituality which inspired the movement. Massignon made his vows as a Franciscan tertiary in February 1931, taking the name Abraham.⁵⁶

4.1.5 Conversion: the Inner struggle further described

The final stages of Mohammed's conversion process need some analysis before we proceed to the rest of his life story. What enabled him to take that final plunge? What was his deepest motivation that enabled him to overcome all the obstacles in his path? What follows demonstrates how profoundly difficult it is for Muslims to accept the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity. The main difficulty seems to be that it goes so strongly against all they have been taught since childhood through the Qur'an, which they believe to be the actual words of God, 'the eternal Word of God made accessible to human beings in time'.⁵⁷ Mohammed's experience not only helps us to appreciate from a Christian perspective what long familiarity may have caused us to take for granted in our own faith, but gives a privileged glance into the Muslim soul as it encounters the most challenging aspects of Christianity. In Mohammed's case, it is not just the theological and spiritual problems he has to deal with, but also a change of culture, a break with his family, severe financial insecurity, and the problem of how he will spend the rest of his life in a foreign country.

The most difficult questions for a convert Muslim are undoubtedly those which surround the person of Jesus Christ, and it is perhaps in this that for the first time in his life Mohammed came

⁵⁵ For one account of this see Ernest Raymond, *In the Steps of St Francis*, Rich and Cowan, London 1945, pp. 213-227.

⁵⁶ See *Massignon/Abd-el-Jalil:Parrain et filleul (1926-1962)*, Les Editions du Cerf, Paris 2007, p. 68.

⁵⁷ *Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims*, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, prepared by Maurice Borrmans, translated from the French by R. Marston Speight, Paulist Press, New York 1990, p. 47.

across something his highly gifted intellect could not grasp, despite prolonged study. One advantage of Islam is its simplicity; at least where the doctrine of God is concerned.⁵⁸ In a letter to Mulla-Zadé he says, for instance:

My faith in Jesus Christ is not strong. Do I even have any? If I do, it is very confused. ... I do not feel capable of answering in the affirmative, with all my heart and in calmness of spirit, the simple question: Do you believe in Christ? I have asked myself the question many times, but invariably strong emotion grips me and I feel troubled. However, this goes when I am at prayer.⁵⁹

Could this be because in prayer he is leaving his reason behind for a while? Mulla-Zadé replies suggesting various reasons for his troubled state, while at the same time reassuring him in the following words that he is not in the least worried about him:

We always have grave misgivings before any big decision, even on a purely human level and subconsciously you are probably thinking of the unknown sufferings which await you, or perhaps it is the break you are making with a long past and a whole world [of Islam, presumably]: then there is the felt experience, not in the least blunted, of the sacrifice which underlies even the smallest act of faith. In this, reason always has to dispossess itself and stretch out towards the God who reveals and beg for his light.⁶⁰

He also reminds him that 'what he is embarking on is the work of a lifetime; conversion to Christianity is only the beginning. With the Apostles he must keep saying "Lord, increase our faith", until Christ is formed in him. Incorporation into the Church through baptism will give him many graces he cannot know at the moment.'⁶¹ He considers Mohammed to be ready for baptism, and prolonged indecision will compromise his progress towards further understanding.⁶² For some discussion of the theology of the God-Man he is advised to talk to his former headmaster, Père Clément. Mulla-Zadé describes his own understanding thus: 'God united himself with a human nature ... in order that we might become like Him. This is the essence of a mystery that never ceases

⁵⁸ As Kenneth Cragg has said, 'Islam is readily intelligible and entirely simple', whereas for Muslims 'Christianity is finally unintelligible and collapses under its own intricacy', a view he has found expressed frequently in literature. See *The Call of the Minaret*, p. 277, from a section entitled 'Interpreting the Christian Doctrine of God'.

⁵⁹ *Mulla-Zadé*, p. 59, in a letter dated 10 December 1927.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p61.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 62.

to fill me with wonder.’⁶³

In his response, dated 27 December, that is two days after the feast of Christmas which would have recalled for him his first conversion experience, Mohammed has to admit he still does not feel ready to go forward. He spent the Christmas holidays at the Franciscan Scholasticate where young friars would receive their theological formation, and admits that while with them he experienced great peace and had no problem worshipping with them; in fact it was a great support to him. He paid homage on his knees to the Infant in the crib as he had on the occasion of his conversion, ‘but’, he confesses, ‘despite your judgement, which I respect, I do not think I am ready.’⁶⁴ He does not feel ‘solid’ enough on several points which he feels indispensable for joining the Church. Moreover he is concerned about his moral lapses (he does not specify what they are), and deep-seated faults. Nevertheless like Mulla-Zadé he realises he must make a decision soon, and begs that he might continue the correspondence with him to that end.

In response, Mulla-Zadé draws Mohammed’s attention to the fact that he is looking at doctrines in isolation, depending solely on his reason, whereas he should consider them in the context of the whole Church, a reality he has experienced in the liturgy he loves, and his prayer life. The divinity of Christ is something he has already experienced. This [spiritual] life he experiences has a principle, the river has a source, the fire a hearth, this divine effect has a proportionate cause:

You know it is Jesus Christ ... you have heard in the Gospels the authentic echo of his voice, in which he declares himself to be Son of Man and Son of God. Theology is nothing but ‘fides quaerens intellectum’ [faith seeking understanding]: the God-Man is both possible and appropriate... it is divinely reasonable, it is simply God making himself ours so that we can become His – nothing remains for you but to adhere to the head as you adhere to the body – and I dare to affirm that you belong to the Church as much as the most fervent Christian.⁶⁵

In the end Jean-Mohammed has to make an act of faith without the benefit of actually seeing the Risen Christ, and touching the wounds of his body as did the apostle Thomas.⁶⁶

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 66. Letter dated 27 December 1927.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69.. The Church is considered in Catholic theology to be the continuation of Christ’s body on earth; this is the source of all her sacramental life. He himself is the Head.

⁶⁶ Jn.20:24-29. Mohammed is no doubt meant to bring to mind the final verse, *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.*

In his next letter, only a few days later, dated 4 January 1928, Jean-Mohammed reports that after a long discussion with his local spiritual director, Charles Thellier de Poncheville (who had been recommended to him by Mulla-Zadé) he is convinced that nothing now separates him, and nothing *can* separate him, from Jesus Christ, not even what he perceives as his severe moral failures.⁶⁷ He is now ready for baptism, and simply mentions to his friend what he now describes as ‘minor problems’, such as the suspension of his bursary, and how he is going to tell his father.

In his reply Mulla-Zadé advises him once more not to tire himself in scrutinising dogmas. He must adhere to the Church, through her to Christ, and through him to the Father, who is one with him in the Holy Spirit. Say to yourself, he says: ‘As a Muslim, I believed that God is One, but it was a numerical unity, abstract, cold, inert; as a Christian, I still believe in the Unity of God, but it is personal, concrete, living; a richness of life at the heart of the one God; a sublime unity, conscious, embraced and loved.’⁶⁸

This is striking in that it gives us an insight into how a Muslim and a Christian might perceive the Oneness of God. A Christian who is not a convert from Islam may well sense the contrast, but would not say it; nor, one would imagine, would these two except in the confidence of a private letter. Jean-Mohammed’s response to Mulla-Zadé’s advice not to tire himself scrutinising dogmas is to open the Gospels and read them without all the prejudices of his Muslim background, then to turn his prayerful attention to the ‘birth of the Man born on a handful of straw in a cave.’⁶⁹ Although one might think this mystery equally incomprehensible on the rational level, it gave him the peace he needed; it was, after all, the Child in the manger that first drew him to Christianity. He goes on to explain his devotion to St Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897), the enclosed Carmelite nun who was canonised in 1925, by the fact that, according to the Carmelite tradition, she was Thérèse *de l’Enfant-Jésus*.⁷⁰

The conclusion we must draw from this account is that it was personal attachment to Jesus

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* p. 71. He is alluding to St Paul’s letter to the Romans 8:31-39.

⁶⁸ *Mulla-Zadé* p. 77-78, in a letter dated 10 January, 1928.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90, in a letter dated 30 January.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Christ (which is at the basis of all conversion, even within Christianity) which enabled him to pass over from Islam to Christianity. It was this alone that enabled him to make the necessary act of faith, and have the courage to go forward. He was baptised at Fontenay, near Paris, 7 April 1928.

5 Religious life and academic career

Not surprisingly, problems came in the wake of this event, but they are not directly relevant to present concerns, so we leave them aside. The question of marriage had arisen before his conversion and caused him some anguish, especially as once again he had to go against his father who required him to marry someone in Fès, a Muslim, which at this delicate stage in his spiritual journey he did not want. He then fell in love with 'a very Christian French young lady', in Paris, but when the moment of decision came he definitively renounced marriage and decided, if he converted, that he wanted to enter the religious life.⁷¹ 'I am becoming more and more certain that Jesus does not want me in the world', he wrote in January 1929 to Mulla-Zadé.⁷² However he went on to complete his doctorate at the Sorbonne which was on the Muslim mystic 'Ayn al-Qudât al-Hamadhâni, before entering the novitiate of the Franciscans where his spiritual formation took place. He completed this in 1931, going on to do further theological study until 1935 in preparation for ordination to the priesthood. At this stage the question arises as to why he joined the Franciscans, an Order not renowned for its intellectual bent, as opposed to the Jesuits or Dominicans where one so intellectually gifted might, it could be argued, feel more at home. But in this regard one of the friars who knew him has said that 'he was drawn irresistibly to Francis of Assisi.'⁷³

5.1 A Franciscan vocation

Why then, did St Francis attract this former Muslim so strongly? St. Francis (1181-1226) was the son of a rich cloth merchant of Assisi who lived an extravagant life typical of his class until, after a long illness, he felt a call from God and renounced his former life to live in abject poverty, only to be disowned by his father, rather as Jean-Mohammed had been, though for different reasons.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 261, in a letter dated 19 August, 1927, from Père Clément to Mulla-Zadé, giving details of Mohammed's life as he asks Mulla-Zadé to enter into correspondence with him.

⁷² *Ibid.* p. 151.

⁷³ This was Frère Joel Colombel, in the Preface to *Témoin*, p. 8.

Francis went on to gather around him a band of followers who became the core of the Franciscan Order. It was he who in 1223 arranged the first Christmas crib, a now universal Christian practice; coincidentally it was at the crib one Christmas night that the young Mohammed's conversion took place, as described above.

Francis was also the first known saint to receive the stigmata.⁷⁴ This in itself would be enough to draw Mohammed to the Franciscans, representing as it does the passion of Jesus Christ in a way which would probably have been denied in his Muslim past. It happened to St Francis as follows: after his unsuccessful attempt to convert the Sultan in Damietta during the Crusades, he withdrew and made a month's retreat on Mount Verna, his hermitage, in Italy. He was praying that he might experience in his own person what Christ experienced on the cross; he was thinking mainly of the love with which he laid down his life, but he also, unexpectedly, received the physical wounds of crucifixion in his hands, feet and side, which he bore until he died about two years later.⁷⁵ The feast of this event is kept in the Franciscan Order on 17th September, the day Jean-Mohammed chose to enter the novitiate in 1929. In his own short biography Jean-Mohammed recounts a conversation with one of his professors (not named), who asked him why he did not want to be a Dominican. He answered simply, 'I love St Francis, for his love of Christ, and for his burning witness before Islam and the Crusades.'⁷⁶ He is referring to the famous incident in Damietta, Egypt, when Francis boldly entered the Saracen camp to try and convert the Sultan, Malik-al-Kamil, to Christianity.⁷⁷

We may conclude that Jean-Mohammed was drawn to the Franciscans on account of the strong emphasis on the poverty of Jesus in his birth and childhood, and his human suffering and glorification at the time of his passion, death and resurrection, both of which portray God in a quite

⁷⁴ There is much written on the life and spirit of St Francis. These bare facts are obtained from the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 632 and p.1544.

⁷⁵ This information obtained from a conversation with Franciscan sister. It is recorded in detail in the early annals of the Order by St Bonaventure and St Thomas of Celano.

⁷⁶ *Témoignage* p. 27.

⁷⁷ See, for instance, Father Cuthbert OSFC, *Life of St Francis of Assisi*, Longmans, Green and Co. London 1914, pp. 278-281.

different way from the Islam Jean-Mohammed had previously known, and not least because of Francis' passionate love for Jesus Christ which led him to renounce his privileged background for a life of poverty. The daughter of Jean-Mohammed's landlady, Marguerite Faguer, has also given us the information, based on her conversations with him, that he knew 'the pride of Islam', and entered the Franciscans through humility; he wished 'to hide himself in the humility of Christianity'.⁷⁸

5.2 Priestly ordination and mission

After his years of theological study, Jean-Mohammed was ordained a Catholic priest in 1935. His commemorative card of this event, which he would distribute to his community and friends, is very revealing of how he saw his vocation as integrating in himself his new found Christianity and the Islam to which he owed so much of his religious formation, and still loved. The design on the front is of a large fish⁷⁹ on whose back is a basket of bread and a bottle of wine, which as Jean-Mohammed explains beneath the picture, is taken from a 2nd century crypt in the Roman catacombs. Arabic script surrounds it to form a circle (in itself a symbol of completion), which he explains is taken from the Qur'an (5.114), and could have been a prayer uttered by Christ at the request of his disciples: 'O Allah our Lord, send us from heaven a Table set (with viands), that there may be for us – for the first and last of us – A solemn festival, and a sign from Thee'.⁸⁰ The commentators affirm, adds Jean-Mohammed, that this text was materially fulfilled, and the Table which was sent from heaven bore bread and fish. On the reverse side of his card he has placed the Greek letter *Tau* at the top. This resembles the capital letter 'T' and is a symbol of the Cross, no doubt partly disguised in this way so as not to cause offence to any of his Muslim friends who may have seen it. After this he has four short paragraphs, freely arranged by himself, from the prophet Isaiah (one of the biblical prophets absent from the Qur'an):

⁷⁸ A personal recollection given to Maurice Borrmans. See *Témoign* p. 61..

⁷⁹ An ancient symbol of Christ and of the Eucharist (the Greek letters form an acrostic 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour). It is found frequently in the catacombs, ancient Christian cemeteries situated underground in Rome.

⁸⁰ This is the translation of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran*, Text, translation and commentary, pub. Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore, Pakistan, 1987. (this edition 1988 reprint). Jean-Mohammad has translated it into French.

I have called you from the far corners of the earth ... I have taken you strongly by the hand, and I will help you. Do not be afraid. Even though mothers may forget, I will not forget you. I have loved you with an everlasting love, and have compassion on you. I will make rivers flow on the bare heights and springs well up in the valleys; I will change the desert into a lake and the arid ground into a fountain of water. Do not be afraid. I have called you by your name. You are mine. And I, your God, love you.

It is rather remarkable that Jean-Mohammed, a former Muslim, feels he can use the word of God in this free manner, so different from how he must have learned to treat the Qur'an. Underneath the scriptural text he has the following, 'Words of God in Isaiah (41-54) addressed to the Patriarch Saint Abraham, the Father of Believers', but has inserted in the margin in his own handwriting, 'addressed to all the descendants of the Patriarch Saint Abraham.'⁸¹ By this it could be argued that he meant to indicate that he sees his priestly vocation as including a hidden ministry to Muslims, for whom Abraham is so important as a prophet and model.

5.3 Academic career: publications

In 1936, quite soon after his ordination to the priesthood, Jean-Mohammed was invited by Mgr Baudrillart, the rector of the *Institut Catholique* in Paris, to teach Arabic language and literature there, later to be supplemented by Islamology. Thus began a long academic career which he undoubtedly loved and which did not end till 1964 when he developed cancer of the tongue, which effectively brought to an end all his speaking activities. He published quite soon in French *A Brief History of Arabic Literature*.⁸² His main concern during this time, however, was to facilitate dialogue and understanding between Muslims and Christians, and for this he has left us a rich resource in his writings which will be analysed in greater depth in the next chapter for what they can teach us about how he saw Islam from a Christian perspective. Here it will suffice just to mention some of the most important. He published many articles, mainly in French, but also in German and Spanish, languages in which he was fluent. His first work in this area was *L'Islam et Nous*.⁸³ The posthumously reprinted edition of this work contains a piece he was asked to write in preparation for the Second Vatican

⁸¹ Italics and translation mine.

⁸² *Brève Histoire de la littérature arabe*, Maisonneuve, 1943, 310 pages. Re-edited in 1946, with the word *brève* dropped from the title. See Maurice Borrmans, *Prophètes* p. 178.

⁸³ First written in 1938, reprinted by *Les Editions du Cerf*, 1981.

Council, entitled *Islam at the Time of the Council*, first written in 1964. It may be noted here that he, along with his better known godfather Louis Massignon, was responsible for the positive attitude towards Islam that we find in a major document produced by the Council, *Nostra Aetate*, which has had a profound effect on the way the Catholic Church relates to non-Christian religions, especially Judaism and Islam. His next major work, produced in 1949, *Aspects intérieurs de l'Islam*, was an expansion and development of *L'Islam et Nous*.⁸⁴ A year later he published *Marie et l'Islam*.⁸⁵ The many articles he published during this time of his academic career are listed in the long bibliography prepared initially by Père Christian Eugène o.f.m. (later supplemented by others) which enables us to appreciate the depth of his scholarship and the breadth of his interests.⁸⁶ A personal high point of all his efforts in the sphere of Christian/Muslim dialogue was a private audience he was granted with Pope Paul VI on 14th May 1966. The latter had written to him expressing an interest in his work, and it was through this connection that he became an advisor for the council texts. The pope also assured him that he prayed with him in spirit every Friday (the Muslim 'Sabbath') for his Muslim brothers.⁸⁷

6 Psychological/Spiritual Crisis: the return to Morocco, 27 April-15 May 1961

This episode in Jean-Mohammed's life is recounted by the French Islamologist, Alfred-Louis de Prémare,⁸⁸ who claims to be a direct witness of the events he relates in a chapter of the book *En Hommage au Père Jaques Jomier op.*⁸⁹ It was intended to be incorporated into a complete biography of Jean-Mohammed which never in fact materialised.⁹⁰ However it still has great value for the light it throws on his ongoing conversion experience. What is of particular interest is whether we

⁸⁴ Editions du Seuil, 1949, 235 pages, 2nd edition in 1949.

⁸⁵ Beauchesne, 1950, 92 pages.

⁸⁶ See *Témoign* pp. 163-172.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49. This was a practice, to be described more fully later, that he embarked on with Louis Massignon and others, as part of his 'mission' to Islam.

⁸⁸ Alfred-Louis de Prémare (1930-2006) spent his childhood in Morocco where his father was a magistrate. He studied Arabic language and literature at the University of Rabat, and went on to become a scholar of Islamic origins, especially the Qu'ran. He is best known for his work, *Les Fondations de l'Islam: Entre Ecriture et Histoire*, Seuil, Paris, 2002.

⁸⁹ Editions du Cerf, Paris, 2002, pp. 321-341. Henceforth *Hommage*.

⁹⁰ *Hommage* p. 321.

can ascertain from this episode whether Jean-Mohammed really was tempted to go back to Islam, and in the light of any judgements made on this issue, to ask how it fits in with his life-long conversion experience.

6.1 The flight

The bare facts as they stand do not redound to his favour. At the time of this episode Jean-Mohammed was not in good health and was resting at the Franciscan house in Cimiez, Nice, in the south of France. Also at this time the Algerian War of Independence was at a particularly difficult stage, which caused him considerable anguish.⁹¹ Moreover he was also suffering badly from depression, a condition to which he was prone.⁹² These are mitigating circumstances but the fact remains that he called his brother to come to him urgently and the two left for Morocco the next day, 27th April, Jean-Mohammed giving no indication to his superiors of what he was doing, and pointedly leaving his religious habit behind. This is a very serious offence for someone who has taken a vow of obedience, and would easily have been interpreted as a clear statement that he had abandoned the religious life, and in his case it would be normal to assume that he had gone back to his native Islam. It must be said, however, that his brother as a Muslim would not understand the seriousness of this; his concern was for his brother's restoration to full health, and he would think that to embrace Islam again would be a great comfort to him.⁹³ In fact it was he who was responsible, to ease his brother's transition to Morocco after an absence of thirty five years, for the article which appeared in a daily newspaper announcing his homecoming. This article extolled Jean-Mohammed's great intellectual gifts and achievements, and added how wonderful it was that 'God

⁹¹ De Prémare reports that there had just been an attempt by some French generals to take power between 22 and 27 April. *Ibid.*, p. 327. Independence for both Morocco and Algeria was gained about this time; Morocco in 1956 and Algeria in 1962. It caused great anguish to Jean-Mohammed and his godfather Louis Massignon, who loved these countries. See, for instance, Mary Louis Gude, *Louis Massignon: The Crucible of Compassion*, University of Notre Dame Press, USA, especially Ch.8 *The Road to Independence in Morocco* (pp. 183-213), and Ch.9, *Algeria, the Ultimate Suffering* (pp. 214-248).

⁹² *Hommage* p. 326.

⁹³ The events as they unfolded are kept in a daily diary by de Prémare, see *Hommage* pp. 329-341.

had guided him; he has returned to his religion, and has declared himself a Muslim'.⁹⁴ Other newspaper articles followed suit and were even reported in France. One reminded readers that the king himself, Mohammad V, had given special permission to him to return to his country, if he so wished, and take his place at the heart of Muslim society. There would have been no difficulty in this; Jean-Mohammed was welcomed into the heart of his family with whom he still had close bonds despite his exile in France, and there was no shortage of job offers, or prospects of marriage.

6.2 Re-conversion begins

How did Jean-Mohammed react to all this, and how did he feel finding himself at last in his beloved homeland, among his close family? It seems at first he was completely unapproachable. A Lebanese Jesuit tried to contact him through a brief note addressed to Omar, his brother, but the latter replied that he could not even at the moment give it to him, since he was undergoing 'une crise vraiment insupportable'.⁹⁵ This was in the first two or three days after his arrival. A little later de Prémare called at his brother Omar's house in the hope of seeing him, but he was not in. However de Prémare left a letter and Jean-Mohammed contacted him later by telephone. He was anxious to inform de Prémare that he was still the same; he had not changed, and that all was well. He was just very tired. However, he continued, he had left France 'in an irregular manner', and as soon as he was better he intended to return.⁹⁶ De Prémare took it upon himself to inform the superior of the Franciscans in Morocco of this (it would have been very difficult for Jean-Mohammed to do this himself, not least because of his poor state of health and fragile mental condition). Thus his superior in France was informed and his situation was soon regularised.

6.3 The return

After this, Jean-Mohammed did not delay his return to France. Père Jean-Bosco Offret, the superior of the Franciscans in Morocco, went to Nice especially for the purpose of welcoming him

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 329. This was on the front page of the newspaper. Omar Abdeljalil., being a government minister, was a person of some importance in the country, and the return of his brother in this manner would be of great public interest.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 332, 'a truly terrible crisis'.

⁹⁶ Telephone conversation reported, *ibid.*, p. 334.

and easing his re-entry into his community in France. Fortunately for our assessment of this episode de Prémare has reported the main lines of the conversation Jean-Mohammed had with Père John-Bosco after his return to France. 'Jean-Mohammed', he said, 'returned to France in a completely shattered state; somewhat worse than he was when he set off on his ill-fated journey. He had hardly recognised the Morocco of his youth as it had changed so much. Moreover he had been in a state of "nervous depression", as a consequence of which he had had doubts about the Church, his faith, and even Christianity itself.'⁹⁷ 'As everybody has', was Père Jean-Bosco's own very revealing comment on the situation. 'Jean-Mohammed', he went on, 'had been aghast when he saw the newspaper articles. In France he had been very homesick for Islam and his native country, but once there he found that he was "a hundred times more Christian".'⁹⁸ Jean-Mohammed's 'crisis', it would seem, as Père John-Bosco hinted, was nothing unusual. At the beginning of a conversion to another religion, or for a Christian at the beginning of religious life, there is normally a lot of fervour and enthusiasm, but it does not last; inevitably aridity and doubt sets in, in order that faith may become stronger and less dependent on the senses. In Jean-Mohammed's case it would be compounded by the fact that he was living in permanent exile from a country he had left behind in initially painful circumstances, from his family whom he had not seen for a very long time, and from the Islam which he still loved. In a state of ill health and after so many years away from Morocco, his homesickness suddenly became overwhelming. Without a doubt he could only have done what he did believing it was right for him to go back to Islam. His brother, of course, would wholeheartedly agree. But the reality of actually being 'at home' soon convinced him that he had made a terrible mistake, and in fact his faith at the deepest level had not been affected at all.

On his return to France it was necessary for Jean-Mohammed to spend some time in a sanatorium in Switzerland to recover his health. His faithful brother stayed there with him for a whole month, as also for a time did Père Jean-Bosco Offret. To sum up this episode in the light of his conversion, part of a letter from his superior in Paris to de Prémare can be quoted: 'He spoke

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 338. The translation is mine, with omissions.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

explicitly of a second conversion, more complete than the first... and he was clear that he had never been shaken in his Catholic faith on the deepest level.⁹⁹

7 The final fifteen years: redemptive suffering

It took Jean Mohammed several months to recover his health sufficiently to allow him to resume his teaching, but he finally went back to the *Institut Catholique* in the autumn of 1961. It was about this time that he prepared a document for the Council Fathers of Vatican II (which began in 1964), as they wanted to draw on his expertise to draft the document *Nostra Aetate*, which was to have such far reaching consequences for the Catholic Church's relations with other religions, especially Islam and Judaism. We are much indebted to Jean-Mohammed, as also to his friend and godfather Louis Massignon, for the positive tone of this document.¹⁰⁰

Sadly Jean-Mohammed's teaching career was soon to come to an end as he was diagnosed with cancer of the tongue in October 1964. In a letter to a Dominican friend (we are not told who) he wrote:

I am undergoing an apprenticeship in poverty just where the Lord gave me so many gifts – conferences in Arabic, French, German, Spanish and English; also teaching contemplatives in these languages... the cancer has been cured but the consequences remain such that my former activities are impossible and I cannot eat normally.¹⁰¹

It seems in fact that from this time until his death in 1979 he lived as a virtual hermit, unable to partake either in the day to day life of his Franciscan community, or the academic work of the *Institut Catholique*. Even the academic work he did in the solitude of his cell was very limited, though he did keep in contact with friends through correspondence. The faithful Mlle Faguer reports bluntly that his suffering was terrible. He could hardly eat anything, being dependent entirely on liquid nourishment; he was almost completely deprived of sleep which left him very weak and unable to bear the slightest noise... he used to go down to the chapel, all alone, in the night, to

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 341, my translation.

¹⁰⁰ Jean-Mohammed's text was prepared at the request of Mgr. Etchegaray, a French bishop. It is not dated but it is thought to have been prepared in August 1964. It is reproduced in full in *Témoin* pp. 111-128.

¹⁰¹ This is reported by Maurice Borrmans, *ibid.*, p. 51. We are not given the date of the letter.

say mass.¹⁰² How, one wonders, did all this affect his spiritual life? From what we know it would seem that he bore his sufferings valiantly with great patience and even joy. Maurice Borrmans corresponded with him regularly during this time, and visited once a year. In one letter dated 3 May (year not recorded), which would be around Easter, Jean-Mohammed wrote: ‘Since my baptism (1928) and my ordination (1935) I have not had a more “authentic” Easter than this year. I am sure the Lord has permitted this trial... and will bring great good from it for the continuation of my mission.’¹⁰³

7.1 Mission

Undoubtedly, his ‘mission’ would be that to which his whole life had been dedicated since his conversion; namely doing all he could to facilitate dialogue and understanding between Christians and Muslims, but now the emphasis would be mostly on prayer, that is, *badaliya*, which would mean intercessory prayer for Muslims and offering his sufferings for them in what he would describe as ‘redemptive substitution’.¹⁰⁴ He himself had been on the receiving end of such prayer in a very real way before his conversion, so he knew its value. He describes, for instance, in his very short biography, how among photocopies given to him in 1960 by the daughter of Maurice Blondel (through whose influence Paul-Mehmet Mulla-Zadé was converted to Christianity) was one about her father who, when he began to lose his sight in 1927, offered this trial for Jean-Mohammed who at that time was groping his way towards Christianity:

that I, a young student, impetuous but rigid in my views, upon whom, many remarked, the gaze of Jesus fell as it did on the rich young man in the Gospel,¹⁰⁵ might ‘see’; see with the eyes of the ‘heart’ (in the biblical sense), who this Jesus of Nazareth really was; he whom I admired and loved as a prophet only, inferior to Mohammad and surpassed by him. But the following year I asked to be baptised.¹⁰⁶

7.2 Legacy

Jean-Mohammed died after a great deal of suffering on 24 November 1979. Despite the fact

¹⁰² As reported to Maurice Borrmans, *ibid.* p. 62..

¹⁰³ *ibid.* p. 51.

¹⁰⁴ This is also the opinion of Maurice Borrmans, *ibid.* p. 52.

¹⁰⁵ Gospel of Luke, Ch.18;18-23.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p. 21.

that he had lived for so long apart from normal Franciscan life, it was recognised that he was still very much a part of his community. A fellow Franciscan, Frère Joel Columbel, who knew him personally, speaks of 'rays of light and holiness which came to us from that source, the *Umma*, which he never betrayed or offended.'¹⁰⁷ The same Franciscan, at his funeral, spoke of him as a 'gift', and a 'sign' from God, someone who was free in both traditions, Islam and Christianity.¹⁰⁸ What is this 'gift', and of what is he a 'sign? His was a very special vocation which he lived in great fidelity, often through great suffering, to unite two very different traditions at a deep spiritual level within himself, and as such he is a 'sign' to all involved in this most difficult of dialogues, that it can be done on the deepest level; but also that there is a great deal in Islam that Christians (and others) can learn to love, despite the seemingly irreconcilable differences on the rational/theological level. That 'gift' we will explore through his writings, all of which, despite their blunt and sometimes negative tone, were for this very purpose: to somehow help Muslims and Christians to live in peace, mutual respect and understanding.

8 Conclusion

The life of Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, though for the most part lived within the confines of his own religious community of Franciscans in Paris, remained deeply rooted in his native Morocco; an exemplary and very fervent Christian, he remained a Muslim to the core, and has opened to us all the riches (and otherwise) of that great religion.

Finally we ask if, and how, he is remembered in Morocco. Has he been forgiven? Have his efforts to promote mutual understanding had any impact on the Muslims who were so shocked at the time of his conversion? It would seem that some little progress has been made in this direction. A recent weekly Moroccan journal, for instance, speaks of him as a 'brilliant student who seemed set for an outstanding career, who chose to become a priest, and lived as a martyr, rejected by his own people', but in fact was given a mission 'to explain Islam from a very tolerant angle, which was

¹⁰⁷ *Témoignage* p. 8, in the Preface.

¹⁰⁸ *Recueil Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, Nouvelles: Institut Catholique de Paris*, (no.3, June 1980) *Homélie à la messe des obsèques*, p. 7.

very rare in those days.’¹⁰⁹ The article concludes with a quote from another Moroccan journal, *Al-Nas-Info*, (Feb. 2007), ‘We have treated Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil unjustly. We need to ask his forgiveness, and restore him to the place he deserves in the Moroccan memory.’

In the next chapter we go on to discuss the two major works Jean-Mohammed has left us for the purpose of helping Christians to better understand Islam, these being *L’Islam et Nous*, and *Aspects intérieures de L’Islam*, in the course of which some doctrinal issues will be further explored and developed. The chapter after that will approach Hassan Dehqani-Tafti’s work, *Chimes of Church Bells*, in the same way.

¹⁰⁹ *Zamane*, June 2011.

CHAPTER 6

LOOKING BACK AT ISLAM: JEAN-MOHAMMED ABD-EL-JALIL

1 Introduction

Christians on the whole, it can safely be said, are very ignorant about what Muslims really think and believe. As David Marshall has said, for instance:

Those who even quite recently might have struggled to see the relevance of such an apparently exotic area of study are now likely to seize the opportunity to ask questions. People are concerned about Islam. Christians in particular have become aware of their need to understand this other faith and to try to make sense of the challenges it poses.¹

This state of affairs could be partly due to the fact that Christianity is a complete system in itself without any reference to Islam (though the same cannot be said in its relationship to Judaism), whereas Islam does need to concern itself to some extent with Christianity, since Jesus and Christians are mentioned several times in the Qur'an, and in fact the very purpose of its existence would seem to be to supersede all previous religions.² However, this ignorance of Christians in the face of Islam is in itself, unfortunately, sufficient to lead to prejudice, mutual suspicion and hatred; all of which leads eventually to violence and war. Against such a background it will be very helpful to look at Islam through the eyes of the two converts from Islam, Hassan Dehqani-Tafti and Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, from the perspective of the Christianity they have embraced. Islam of course is very varied and seems to have no unified belief system comparable to that of the Church and its magisterium in Christianity, except perhaps in the form of the so-called *Five Pillars of Islam* which represent key aspects of the faith, and the Hadith through which has been built up a body of generally accepted beliefs. Professions of faith or creeds have been formulated at various times by individual scholars or groups of scholars, but 'there exists no standard or universally accepted Muslim creed.'³ However, certain things are commonly understood which form the basis of most creeds; these would include, for instance, the nature of God, of prophethood, and the mission of

¹ *Learning from How Muslims see Christianity*, a booklet of talks given at the Salisbury Diocesan Conference on 'Living with Difference' by David Marshall, 2006, *Introduction*, p. 3.

² See for instance Tim Winter, *The Last Trump Card: Islam and the supersession of Other Faiths* in which he states 'Supersessionist theology is constitutive of Islam itself, and is an indispensable justification for its existence.' (*Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, pub. Peeters, Louvain, Belgium – date not known)

³ Sabina Schmidtke, *Creeds*, in J.M. McAuliffe (Ed.) *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, 5 vols. Leiden, Brill, The Netherlands, 2001-6 (Henceforth EQ) Vol.1, p. 480.

Muhammad.⁴ It is impossible therefore to cover the whole spectrum of Islam, but we can at least hope to learn something of value from two men who have lived it from the inside. Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, after his conversion, was totally devoted to the task of helping his fellow Christians understand better, and so respect, Islam. For this purpose his extant writings (he had hoped to do more but bad health in his final years prevented him), are particularly valuable, especially as his experience of Islam before his conversion was very positive and fulfilling.

1.1 Background of Abd-el-Jalil's approach to Islam: being a bridge

Before his conversion Jean-Mohammed was a Muslim to the core, very fervent and sure of his convictions. We are very fortunate that after his conversion he did not forget his past but dedicated his whole life, within the framework and demands of his Franciscan life, to being a 'bridge' between Muslims and Christians. It has truly been said of him that 'he was deeply attached to Islam with every fibre of his being, through national and family ties, and he suffered deeply on account of the huge chasm which separated it from the Church of Jesus Christ.⁵ He knew on one level that he was engaged in a hopeless task, because 'no *rapprochement* was possible on the theological/dogmatic level. There the chasm was too deep. Jesus Christ is not, for Islam, the Son of God. The affirmation of the dogmas of the Trinity and Redemption are a scandal for Muslims.'⁶ Jean-Mohammed's witness and his writings have not, for all that, been in vain. It helps enormously; in fact is indispensable, to the process of mutual understanding, what the 'other' thinks and believes. It helps especially to know this from someone who has known Islam from the inside and knows how problematic any kind of *rappport* is from the Christian perspective. In the process of such dialogue misunderstandings are at least clarified, if not entirely eradicated, and the very effort to understand what the other (whether this be an individual or Islam itself) thinks and believes, helps us to grow in mutual respect and friendship. In this respect Jean-Mohammed said something that perhaps only a convert could say, which is that he had arrived at the certainty that 'Christianity is not a religion like

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ See Mgr. Paul Poupard of the *Institut Catholique*, in the Introduction to *Nouvelles Institut Catholique de Paris, 1979-1980, Recueil Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil*, (Henceforth *Recueil*) p. 3.

⁶ See Georges Hourdin *Un double appel à la transcendance et à l'adoration, Recueil*, p. 13.

other religions and that is what makes the difficulties greater, but it also makes its transcendence all the clearer.⁷ There is a paradox here in that Christianity, which brings God down to earth, in a manner of speaking, in the Incarnation, is seen by Jean-Mohammed as revealing God's transcendence in a more complete way than Islam. It might be argued that he sees Islam differently from his Christian perspective, and that is inevitably true, but the facts of what he reports and the attitudes of people he has known are the same, and as such there is much we can learn.

Jean-Mohammed has left two important works which we will now examine: *L'Islam et Nous*⁸ and *Aspects intérieurs de l'Islam*, published in 1949, which builds on this.⁹ But first we will look at his very brief biographical essay, *Témoignage d'un Tard-Venu à l'Eglise*.¹⁰ Written after many years in the religious life when he had already retired from his lectureship at the *Institut Catholique*, and had recently been diagnosed with cancer of the tongue, it tells us much about his basic attitude towards his former faith, and how he approaches dialogue.

2 Témoignage d'un tard-venu à L'Église

This piece of writing (Witness of a Latecomer to the Church) is only the length of a normal chapter in an average book. In it Jean-Mohammed begins by admitting his great reserve concerning his own spiritual life, and then to the fact that he has not written a great deal, preferring a live audience where thoughts can be tossed back and forth. 'I need contact with a live audience' he says, 'even if it's hostile, for my thought to become precise and find expression.'¹¹ Most of his courses at the *Institut Catholique* were delivered from his notes only.¹² 'Some could be published' he says, 'if God gives me sufficient health, and holds back from me that desire that I have learned from St Paul, *cupio dissolvi et esse cum Christo* (I desire to be dissolved and be with Christ).'¹³ In fact he was able

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11. He is quoting from *Aspects intérieurs de l'Islam*.

⁸ First published in Sept.-Oct 1938 in the *Nouvelle Revue Théologique de Louvain*. The edition used here was published by *Foi Vivante, Les Editions du Cerf*, Paris 1991.

⁹ *Aux Editions du Seuil*, 1949

¹⁰ See *Témoignage* pp.17-36 which encompasses the whole work.

¹¹ *Témoignage*, p. 19.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ See Paul's letter to the Philippians 1:23. A selection of Jean-Mohammed's writings has in fact been put together by his successor at the *Institut Catholique*, Y. Moubarac, in *Receuil*. He and François Legrain have also

to do hardly anything from this time on, but there is great value in what he achieved before the onset of his illness.

2.1 Encountering Jacques Maritain

What immediately stands out in this text is a great concern about his relationship with the French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain who had been one of his tutors long ago at the *Institut Catholique* before his conversion. His influence over the young Muslim student was quite strong, it would appear. Jean-Mohammed speaks, for instance, of the great 'grace' of his early encounters with Maritain. He seemed to him to be 'a reflection from heaven – the beginning of that glorious life.'¹⁴ He was profoundly affected by his 'gentleness, humility, peace and delight in God.'¹⁵ It could be argued that Maritain unwittingly set in motion the process of the young student's conversion because of this initial attraction, but in his maturity Jean-Mohammed disagreed with him quite profoundly, in a way that caused him some anguish. He records that he still has letters from Maritain written to him in the early years of his religious life, but then for some reason they stopped. 'Was it because of my frankness, my resistance to some of his ideas?' he wonders.¹⁶ Maritain was keen that Jean-Mohammed should read seriously the work of Aquinas, 'and it required' he said, 'a great deal of perseverance. I did not read it in the *métro*, but in the silence of my cell accompanied by great recollection and prayer... over a period of four years.'¹⁷ However it did not mean a great deal to him and seems to have given him something of an inferiority complex, since he refers to himself as a 'thomiste perdu'.¹⁸ What he really objected to, however, was the *Summa contra Gentiles* (Summa against the Gentiles). He found he was unable to read this to the end; the title

composed a complete bibliography of his published works and articles in various periodicals, Spanish, German and French. See *Receuil* pp. 25-30.

¹⁴ *Témoignage* p. 28.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) was a native of Paris who converted to Roman Catholicism in 1906. He became a renowned expert on the philosophy and theology of St Thomas Aquinas, and held various professorial chairs in Paris and abroad. Between 1945 and 1948 he was the French ambassador to the Holy See. After the death of his wife in 1960 he went to live with the Little Brothers of Jesus in Toulouse, and in 1970 became one himself. These Brothers were 'founded' by Charles de Foucauld. In fact De Foucauld wrote a monastic rule, but no one joined him in his lifetime. Now they are spread throughout the world. See *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Ed. F.L.Cross and E.A.Livingstone, OUP 1997, p. 1038.

¹⁶ *Témoignage* p. 28.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁸ A 'failed thomist', *Ibid.*, p. 27.

alone shocked him. He tried to attribute his reaction to the fact that it was a work of its time, but he could not help still strongly objecting to the word *contra*.¹⁹ The words *against* and *anti* are not part of my vocabulary,' he insisted.²⁰ 'For', he continued, 'from my very first contact with the Gospel I have taken to heart Jesus' words that he came not to condemn, but to save.'²¹ He learned the same attitude from his friend Paul Mehmet Mulla-Zadé, who learned it from the French Catholic philosopher Maurice Blondel who assisted him in his conversion process, as he had Jean-Mohammed; that is, 'that the Christian is not *against* others, whilst at the same time being *wholly other*.'²² At this point in his 'biography' Jean-Mohammed makes a rare criticism of 'Islamic thinkers' whom he considers to have an attitude of 'victorious refutation'.²³ 'It is only too easy', he explains, 'to harden the position of the adversary, or reduce it to some simplistic notion, to enable one to refute it "victoriously", or even ridicule it.'²⁴ He reminds us that 'there will be many different dwellings in the Father's house, especially because the path of the growth of human reason is slow and fragile, but in the end there will be in every domain a great diversity in a sumptuous unity.'²⁵

Maritain even had some influence on Jean-Mohammed's spiritual life by giving him books to read when he had entered the Franciscan novitiate, one of which is particularly significant, not only because it developed in the young novice a lifelong devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus, but it also highlighted for him a profound difference between Islam and Christianity. This book was *The True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*.²⁶ It contains much about being a 'slave' to both Jesus and Mary, albeit a 'slave of love'.²⁷ It must have strongly recalled for him the Muslim attitude of utter submission to the God who was seen as having total control over the destiny of humankind; a God

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²¹ *Ibid.* See Gospel of John.3:17.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.* cf. Gospel of John 14:2, 'In my Father's house there are many places to live in.' (NJB translation)

²⁶ By Saint Louis-Marie de Montfort, a French priest of the 17th century (b.1673), renowned for his preaching, catechesis, and missionary activity in his native Brittany. This major work was unpublished in his lifetime, and only discovered in 1842. See the Preface by Robert Asch to the latest edition, published by the Baronius Press, London 2006.

²⁷ See especially pp. 34-39, and p. 74.

one could only serve, not love.²⁸ When Jean-Mohammed encountered the word 'slave', he was, by his own admission, 'taken aback'.²⁹ He quotes Paul's letter to the Galatians (Ch.4:2), 'You are no longer a slave, but a son.'³⁰ When he was in formation doing his theological studies, one of his professors to whom he voiced objections of this nature retorted, 'But you are still a Muslim!' 'So much the better', was his response, 'if it can be brought into my Christianity.'³¹ The book as a whole nevertheless was very much a part of his spiritual life, and for this he thanked Maritain. It contains an act of consecration to Mary, the mother of Jesus, which he admits to saying frequently, but without the offending word 'slave', and also one of his favourite prayers; 'I am all yours, Mary, and all I have belongs to you.', but he confesses that he never said it 'without remembering to think of J.M. (i.e. Jacques Maritain), all the while offering what God has given to me through him and of him.'³²

Despite his strong affection, Jean-Mohammed did not hesitate to speak his mind in criticism of Maritain, and this too is revealing of his attitude to relations with other religions. A notable instance concerned Maritain's attitude to the 'other', in which he perceived a certain lack of respect which he found very offensive. He refers to a passage in Maritain's work *Le Paysan du Garonne* in which he speaks of the human face as *un museau*.³³ Jean-Mohammed considers the 'face' (*visage*, as he refers to it, in the normal usage) of the 'other' (in this case the non-Christian), to be what is most sacred about him or her. In his opinion Maritain has allowed himself to caricature and make fun of something as transcendent as the human face. Jean-Mohammed repeats the principle described above, that before these 'others' whoever they are, every Christian must remain *other* without letting this become *against*. 'If Maritain could hear me preaching or speaking', he adds, 'he would perhaps be surprised at the vigour with which I constantly remind Christians to *be* Christians

²⁸ This Muslim perception of God will be dealt with later in the chapter.

²⁹ *Témoignage* p. 25.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³³ An animal's snout.

as completely as possible, in whatever circumstances God places them.’³⁴ He goes on to draw a contrast between Maritain’s attitude, as least as manifested in this unfortunate example, with the very humble, respectful attitude shown to him personally by Pope Paul VI when he had a private audience with him on 14 May, 1966. He describes it thus:

I dare to say in all simplicity that in his goodness which has no limits, and with a humility that confounds me, he wished that I should be photographed with him... Greatly surprised, I could not refrain from asking, ‘But Holy Father, do you really wish to be photographed with your son? – With my brother’ was the instant response, pronounced with gravity and dare I say it, affection.³⁵

It is perhaps not surprising that Jean-Mohammed’s relationship with Maritain did not prosper, though he felt it deeply, believing as he did that people with differences (Muslims and Christians, for instance) should be able to express very contrary opinions with respect and in friendship. He concludes: ‘Even if no non-Christian falls upon this offending page of Maritain, I, who come from the midst of them, and never stop dreaming of the day when we will all sit together at the Table of the Lord, feel it as a personal injury on behalf of them all.’³⁶ It would appear that Jean-Mohammed did make some effort to rebuild his relationship with Maritain, but apparently with little success. A brief indication of this may be found in a letter he wrote to his godfather, Louis Massignon, ‘I have not yet felt able to write to M. Maritain,’ he confessed, ‘because I would like to be correctly understood without being the cause of more pain.’³⁷ This would be only two years after he had entered the Franciscan novitiate. However despite the difficulties and misunderstandings, Maritain undoubtedly retained a fatherly concern and affection for his old student. There is a hint of this much later in a letter he wrote to Massignon at the time of Jean-Mohammed’s disastrous return to Morocco in 1961, when it was generally thought he had returned to Islam.³⁸ After speculating at some length about what could have been his motives for such a flight, he ends with the words, ‘I am with you in

³⁴ *Témoignage* p. 32.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³⁷ Letter dated 10 January, 1932, in *Massignon/Abd-el-Jalil, Parrain et Filleul 1926-1962, Correspondance rassemblée et annotée par Françoise Jacquin*, Les Editions du Cerf, Paris 2007

³⁸ This episode is fully described in the previous chapter.

your pain. I embrace you with great affection.’³⁹

3 L’Islam et Nous

3.1 Introduction

This short work was first published in 1938 in the *Nouvelle Revue théologique de Louvain*, and then edited as a book in 1947. It was reprinted with two other short works in 1991. Short as it may be, it is densely packed and very important as it enables us to see how Jean-Mohammed saw Islam from the perspective of his conversion to Christianity. He now saw it in a very different light, for ‘as most theologians today would agree, conversion entails a radical reorientation of one’s desires, thought processes and actions.’⁴⁰

It will be noticed that in the text of *L’Islam et Nous*, Islam can sometimes be portrayed quite negatively by Jean-Mohammed, despite his confessed deep love of it. The ‘nous’ of the title definitely indicates that it is for the consumption of his fellow Christians. In the light of his conversion to Christianity he sees Islam as full of deficiencies. This is inevitable as he cannot in these circumstances be completely objective; his way of seeing has changed quite radically, rather as St Paul’s did after his conversion. As is related in the *Acts of the Apostles*, this happened in a burst of light that literally blinded him; a light that he perceived as Christ, whom he had been persecuting in the members of the early Church.⁴¹ It completely disorientated him to begin with, but in his new way of seeing he became arguably Christianity’s greatest theologian. Jean-Mohammed has likened his own experience to that of St Paul in spoken conversations to young Franciscans.⁴²

The text of *L’Islam et Nous* is not divided into chapters as such, but individual sections dealing with different aspects of Islam, which will be dealt with in turn.

³⁹ *Massignon/Abd-el-Jalil correspondence*, p281/2, in a letter dated 10 May 1961.

⁴⁰ See James J. Walter, *Conversion*, in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane, p212, pub. Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1987.

⁴¹ Acts of the Apostles 9:3, 22:6

⁴² See previous chapter, also *Témoin*, p. 66.

3.2 A Paradox: Islam close yet distant

Islam, Jean-Mohammed explains, is at the same time ‘very close and very distant’.⁴³ Some would classify it as a Christian heresy,⁴⁴ whilst others would deny that it is a religion at all.⁴⁵ The ‘closeness’ is clear to us when we encounter familiar characters in the Qur’an; Jesus, Mary his mother, and many prophets we know from the Hebrew Scriptures are there, as well as familiar themes such as creation. The ‘distance’ will become very apparent in the later sections. And yet, it is ‘without mysteries, sacraments, sacrifice and priesthood, but still nevertheless presents itself as a revealed religion.’⁴⁶ Jean-Mohammed sees Islam as severely deficient because of this and even hints at doubts that it is a ‘revealed religion’ at all; it ‘presents’ itself as a revealed religion, he says. Nevertheless, despite the lack of ‘sacraments, priesthood and mystery’, some Christians have converted to Islam. In his opinion this could only happen because they have not understood the ‘true face’ of the religion of their childhood, perhaps considering it ‘outmoded’, or too overlaid with the ‘sentimentality characteristic of the Middle Ages.’⁴⁷ But there are also instances in which Islam has ‘reactivated the indelible grace of baptism’, thus awakening a latent Christianity.⁴⁸ Jean-Mohammed then addresses the opposite phenomenon of the conversion of Muslims to Christianity. He speaks of the ‘apparent scandal of the difficulty, even the impossibility, that one hears of sometimes, of the conversion of Muslims.’⁴⁹ He wonders how Muslims can be led to see ‘history in its true light’, and be brought ‘to sit down with us at the same Table of the Lord.’⁵⁰ However, he says – and one can detect a note of sadness here – despite these conversions, and even their ‘total consecration to the Church’s service’, these converts ‘have not raised the horizons of the Church to

⁴³ *L’Islam et Nous*, Les Editions du Cerf 1991, p. 13.. All quotations in this chapter will be from this edition.

⁴⁴ For instance John of Damascus (655-750 CE). John attributes Islam’s origin to Muhammad’s knowledge of the New Testament, and to the influence of an Arian monk whom he supposedly encountered. See *Understanding Christian-Muslim Relations, Past and Present*, Clinton Bennet, Continuum, London 2008, p. 70.

⁴⁵ For instance Hugh of Cluny (1049-1119). See *Priests and People*, Jan 2004, article by Michael Fitzgerald M.Afr.

⁴⁶ *L’Islam et Nous* p. 14.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* He gives Charles de Foucauld as an example. One could add Louis Massignon who also rediscovered his faith in an Islamic context.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15’

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

the vision of the masses of humanity barricaded in Islam.⁵¹ This word ‘barricaded’ is quite strong. Jean-Mohammed does not explain further, so one must surmise that he sees Muslims as somehow imprisoned in their religion, perhaps on account of a sense of superiority, or because they consider Christianity has been abrogated since the advent of Islam, a state of affairs which would obviate the need to look into what Christianity really teaches, beyond familiar stereotypes.⁵²

Jean-Mohammed ends this section by telling us that he is assuming a basic knowledge of Islam in his readers; ‘the main lines of its dogmatic teaching’, and his purpose here is simply ‘to trace a sort of curve to help us reflect and pray better.’⁵³ It is not, he says, ‘an exhaustive *exposé* or a systematic comparison with Christianity.’⁵⁴ He is offering merely ‘hints and suggestions’ which may prepare us to understand certain facts and attitudes of the Muslim world.⁵⁵

3.3 God, One and Transcendent

Monotheism is perhaps the main area in which Muslims and Christians are very close, yet very far apart. Jean-Mohammed begins by stating the traditional Muslim understanding of God; that he is One, without ‘associates’, and anything which contradicts this in any way is declared to be “*shirk*”: that is, polytheism, idolatry, “association”.⁵⁶ In a footnote he concedes that there are texts which speak of God’s nearness to humanity and the possibility of loving him, but they are not imposed on believers with the same force as in Christianity, and are less frequent.⁵⁷ In fact ‘to say that one is loved by God is, in the view of the Qur’an, all the more unacceptable in that such a pretension is part and parcel of a certain confusion of the human and the divine (cf. Q 5:18, “The Jews and the Christians have said: We are the sons of God and his well-beloved ones.”)⁵⁸ For the

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Jean-Mohammed addresses this issue in more detail in a later section of the present work, *Some Dominant Psychological Characteristics*, pp. 57-65.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p. 20. He then encourages more in-depth reading, but warns in a footnote that not all that is published is of equal value. Also he advises us in a footnote that It is important, when Islam is portrayed, in films for instance, as violent and inhumane, ‘to realise that this does not represent the true spirit of Islam’. (Note 2, p. 20.)

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20, note 1.

⁵⁸ Denis Gril, University of Aix-en-Provence, EQ Vol.3, *Love and Affection*, p. 233.

most part, continues Jean-Mohammed, it is to be understood that ‘there is no one like Him, and he does whatever he likes, and whatever pleases him.’⁵⁹ ‘Because of this understanding of God’, he continues, ‘official Islam excludes all possibility – even by grace – of knowledge of and intimate communion with God.’⁶⁰ Denis Gril confirms this, ‘for,’ he says, speaking of how the Qur’an understands this matter: ‘People attract God’s love to themselves by their works and especially by imitation of the Prophet, but there can be no pretension of loving God on their own initiative.’⁶¹ Rather, Jean- Mohammed continues, it is our lot ‘simply to submit to him, to live in absolute dependence on his will: that is true “*islam*”.’⁶² He then comments that ‘everything that represents the life of faith, hope and charity as understood by Christians is shocking to Muslims, who see there nothing but hollow words.’⁶³

Thus already in his comparison of Islam and Christianity, Jean-Mohammed has made us aware of a seemingly unbridgeable chasm in the way we understand the nature of God. And yet, ‘for Christians too’, he points out, ‘God lives in inaccessible light’. (1Tim.6:16-17); but at the same time he has ‘pitched his tent among us’. He has become ‘God with us’, he lives in us; through the Man-God, through Jesus.’⁶⁴ This is the mystery which so overwhelmed Jean-Mohammed at the moment of his very sudden conversion on Christmas night, 1925, during Midnight Mass.⁶⁵ Islam, Jean-Mohammed believes, ‘throws us back to the preparatory stages of God’s revelation of himself as found in the Old Testament, by becoming more firmly entrenched in its spirit and exaggerating the emphasis on divine Transcendence.’⁶⁶ Here Jean-Mohammed is saying something quite revolutionary, which is that despite the fact that Islam follows Christianity chronologically, and is generally understood by Muslims to supersede it and be spiritually superior, in the history of

⁵⁹ *L’Islam et Nous* p. 21.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁶¹ Gril, *op.cit.* p. 233.

⁶² *L’Islam et Nous* p. 22.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* cf. Jn.1:14, ‘And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us’. Literally this is ‘pitched his tent among us’, thus recalling the desert dwelling days of the Israelites during the Exodus.

⁶⁵ This is described in detail in the previous chapter, and the point made that there could not be a less Muslim conception of God, than the one that drew him to Christianity.

⁶⁶ *L’Islam et Nous* p. 23.

salvation, it precedes it. Quite independently Kenneth Cragg, in his book *Muhammad and the Christian: A Question of Response*,⁶⁷ would appear to make the same point; he asks the reader to consider not only the timescale of religions, but also the place, the concrete situation, of their occurrence. “Where” can be critical’, he says, ‘for places can be “contemporary” in time and in no way “contemporary” in character. The fourth century BC was one thing in Athens and another in Stonehenge. There was nineteenth century cannibalism as well as nineteenth-century capitalism, depending whether one was in Ecuador or Europe.’⁶⁸ The question, not asked by Cragg, is about where sixth century Arabia fits in this scheme to things.

3.4 God as Father

Jean-Mohammed next turns to the question of the divine paternity. This, he says, is ‘confusedly affirmed by Israel, but is rejected in Islam as “anthropomorphism”’.⁶⁹ The Muslim is ‘revolted’, he says, by the use of the name ‘father’ for God; the Qur’an states unequivocally, *He begets not, nor was he begotten* (Q112).⁷⁰ Jean-Mohammed then gives the Christian position, which in words is the same: ‘God cannot beget: the divine Essence, the Most Holy Trinity, does not beget.’⁷¹ In support of this statement he draws the reader’s attention to the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 CE which taught this truth in almost identical terms as the Qur’an.⁷² The Council was responding to a certain Abbot Joachim who had taken issue with a quote from Peter Lombard which stated, ‘For there is a certain supreme reality which is the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and it neither begets nor is begotten.’ The Council decreed that this statement was completely orthodox.⁷³ Moreover the same Council states at the beginning of its *Constitutions* (though not relating to this issue of the controversy with Abbot Joachim) a phrase that could have been lifted straight from the Qur’an: ‘ We firmly believe and simply confess that there is only one true God,

⁶⁷ Oneworld Publications, Oxford, 1984. The edition quoted was reprinted in 1999.

⁶⁸ *Muhammad and the Christian*, p. 92.

⁶⁹ *L’Islam et Nous* p. 23.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁷³ See *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Vol.1 (*Nicaea 1 – Lateran V*) ed. Norman P. Tanner SJ, pub. Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, London and Washington 1990, p. 231.

eternal and immeasurable, almighty, unchangeable, incomprehensible and ineffable.⁷⁴

Muslims, says Jean-Mohammed, 'cannot conceive of any begetting but the carnal, or any paternity but the human... this excludes not only the Incarnation, but our adoption as sons in Jesus Christ.'⁷⁵

3.5 God as Creator

Jean-Mohammed then turns his attention to the creation. 'Why did God create?' he asks. 'For Muslims', we are informed, 'this is an "impious question"; you do not ask God for his reasons, says the Qur'an'.⁷⁶ Muslims even feel some repugnance, he claims, at the thought that God should have a plan. For them history is 'a series of unconnected manifestations of the divine will, and (as a consequence of this) we should not be surprised to encounter some deeply reflective Muslims who find life absurd. Others, afraid to think about it too much, just live life in submission to God and his decrees.'⁷⁷ He next gives a vivid insight into the way he sees things in a very different light since his conversion; in Christianity he experiences the 'splendid and solid architecture of Catholic dogma, but above all, we Christians know creation is a work of love, that life was given to us for our happiness, and this happiness comes from the love of God, in which it consists.'⁷⁸ And heaven – which we do glimpse here below despite many trials -will be 'inexhaustible beatitude, fully conscious and no longer reversible, of a son intimately united to his Father, of a friend in perfect and unchangeable possession of his Friend,'⁷⁹

3.6 Revelation

Jean-Mohammed begins this section with a heartfelt postscript to the last section:

But, for Islam, the all-powerful God cannot condescend to such a love, let alone such an excess of love; and he does not at all expect any love from his creature ... he is jealous of his will, absolute sovereign of his work. To recognise this is the minimum requirement for every creature (person), but it is also, definitively, the one thing strictly necessary for salvation.⁸⁰

We are then given the familiar pattern of revelation as understood in Islam. It has two focal

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

⁷⁵ *L'Islam et Nous*, p. 24.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* No specific quotation is given.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24/5.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* p. 28.

points; God's Oneness, without associate or equal, and his prescriptions and commands which are to be obeyed. Reward or chastisement will follow in the beyond according to the believer's observance of these.⁸¹ However 'God is not obliged to take account of the works of men, without thereby ceasing to be just. In fact, salvation depends on faith alone.'⁸² It might seem from a Christian perspective that there is little incentive to good, if God may not even notice.⁸³

This message has been brought to humanity through the prophets, of whom Adam was the first, and Abraham one of the greatest, 'who gave the most complete message before Muhammad, "the seal of the prophets" ... All the prophets had the same mission; God, through them, has not ceased to establish the true religion in its integrity.'⁸⁴ Muhammad came to re-establish the 'pure' religion of Abraham, and 'rid Judaism and Christianity of human inventions and additions.'⁸⁵ The main point at issue, however, is 'the recognition of God's Oneness, under pain of eternal damnation.'⁸⁶

Jean-Mohammed finally makes an important point about Muhammad's life, which is a part of his message: 'From Medina, Muhammad used temporal and political means, war, diplomacy, and sometimes cruelty, to impose himself on the whole of Arabia.'⁸⁷ He died on 8 June 632, leaving to his followers this idea of battles, reversals and triumphs, of war approved by Allah, which has profoundly marked the Muslim ideal.⁸⁸ Kenneth Cragg has also drawn attention to this point, citing it as a major reason why Christians cannot respond entirely positively to the prophecy of Muhammad:

The military dimension of original Islam and its uninhibited embrace of the political arm are certainly crucial factors in deterring the Christian from a positive response to Muhammad. For they are so sharply, and in some apologists, so confidently, alien to New Testament criteria, as to seem to warrant unreserved rejection by any thinking that has even remotely

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 28/29.

⁸³ This thought is not part of the text.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29/30.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

understood Gethsemane.⁸⁹

The very different ‘beginnings’ of Christianity and Islam have forged very different mentalities, a state of affairs that has separated us ever since.

There will be a more detailed reflection on the Prophet Muhammad later in the chapter as he is of course intimately connected with the subject of revelation. Here it seems appropriate, in response to Jean-Mohammed’s comments above, to expand on the topic of revelation in itself, as I would argue that it is perhaps the most important issue dividing Christianity and Islam.

3.6.1 Revelation: further considerations

The topic of revelation according to the Qur’an as understood by Muslims evokes some strong words from the normally very gentle Hassan Dehqani-Tafti. The basic problem is that the Qur’an, traditionally believed by Muslims to be the literal word of God, transmitted through the Prophet Muhammad who was merely a passive instrument in the process, claims to be a book in which there is no doubt (Q2:2, 10:37, 32:2), which also confirms previous revelations (Q2:41, 89,91,97 etc.). This gives Muslims the certainty that they are correct in their doctrinal positions, for instance concerning the nature of God, the non-divine status of Jesus etc., and if other religions differ, as is the case with Christianity, then they must be wrong. In order for this conclusion to be in accord with the Islamic position, the Christian Scriptures (including the Hebrew Scriptures, or the ‘Old Testament’) must have been altered. In fact to compound the problem the Qur’an states that this has actually happened (Q2:75, 4:46). How does one resolve this dilemma? Hassan expresses himself very incisively on the matter as follows:

The Islamic viewpoint is that since the Qur’an is the product of divine memory and heavenly inspiration, it is not for mankind to question its source and origin, to ask ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ regarding its content or try to understand it through scientific research or literary and historic criticism. It is for this reason that the theory of distortion came to be. Based on this theory, any areas where the Bible differs from the Qur’an is considered to be the result of intervention by Christians who distorted their own holy book and made changes to it. Had they not done so they would have accepted the insights of the Prophet of Islam and been converted. Instead, by being unfaithful and by deflowering their own holy books, Christians have remained ignorant and have gone astray.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ See *Muhammad and the Christian*, Ch.4 *The Political Equation*, p. 31.

⁹⁰ *Chimes of Church Bells*, p. 8.

Unfortunately, according to Hassan, Muslims have believed this for centuries, and as it is mixed up with strong religious sentiments it makes dialogue very difficult. Hassan goes on to declare that it is 'absurd' that Christians should alter their own holy books, centuries before Islam emerged.⁹¹ Nor is there any proof that this has been done. Hopefully, he concludes, 'over time the path to greater understanding will be opened up by way of a growing respect for scientific research methods and the study and comparison of historical texts.'⁹² Fortunately this is now happening to some extent.

Thus does Hassan succinctly describe the problem. Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil is less forthright in this matter, but it is of no less concern to him. In his first letter to his mentor, Paul-Mehmet Mulla-Zadé who was helping him through the conversion process after his mystical experience at the Christmas crib, he declares he cannot accept anything of Christianity if the Scriptures are not reliable. And so he begins his study of Christianity by examining for their authenticity the relevant sacred texts. After much reading around the issue he comes to the conclusion that there has been no falsification, as he understands the matter.⁹³ He questions the Qur'anic assertions to the contrary, which in turn raises questions about the prophetic status of Muhammad. Both men, out of respect for their former religion, tactfully decide not to pursue the matter, believing Muhammad to have been sincere, that is, neither an imposter nor subject to hallucinations. And so the matter of different revelations according to Christianity and Islam is put aside as too sensitive to address in depth. However, once he has convinced himself that the Scriptures have not been falsified, Jean-Mohammed applies himself to learn from them with confidence about the Christian revelation.

The following section attempts to throw light on the subject of revelation by looking at it as it is understood in Islam, and the problems it presents from their own perspective. After that some examples will be given of modern Muslim theologians who are making some progress towards resolving this difficult issue.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 8/9.

⁹³ See thesis Ch.5, section 4.1.2. A footnote gives a list, by no means exclusive, of his reading matter.

3.6.2. Revelation within Islam

The Islamic terminology for the general word ‘revelation’ says much about how the phenomenon is perceived. Two words are used: *wahy*, which translates as ‘communication’, and *tanzil*, which indicates the ‘sending down’ of the sacred text to the Prophet. It consists in the transmission of a message rather than the ‘unveiling’ of God himself as implied by the English word with its Christian origins.⁹⁴ Both Arabic terms suggest a distance between God and mankind, whereas the Christian word ‘revelation’ suggests that God himself is making himself known, over and above his will and guidance for the welfare of humanity. This is a profound difference and at the heart of the Muslim/Christian divide. Later in the chapter I hope it will be clear that the gulf is not so unbridgeable as it at first seems.

Concerning the mode of revelation (this term is still used in Islam, though the Arabic has a different meaning, as explained above), the Qur’an tells us little, but exegetical and historical traditions have dwelt on it in detail.⁹⁵ Whether it actually concerned the angel Gabriel is doubtful. The Qur’an itself does not call Gabriel an angel, though in the tradition there seems to be a conflation of God’s Spirit, the angels and Gabriel. Q2:97 states that it *is* Gabriel, but in an earlier Meccan sura (Q5:1-18) the most straightforward reading indicates a vision of God.⁹⁶ The biographical tradition shifts between involving Gabriel and speaking as though revelation were direct. Daniel Madigan concludes accordingly: ‘We might deduce from this that the angel plays what we could call the role of a theological safeguard. If the Prophet has dealings only with Gabriel and not with God directly, the absolute transcendence and immateriality of God is safeguarded.’⁹⁷ According to Islam’s lofty concept of the transcendence of God, it would not be appropriate for him to have produced the actual wording of the Scripture, which would involve Him in the use of a human language with its sounds, scripts and grammar, all of which are clearly created. Also it could not be ignored that there were at least seven recognised readings of the Qur’an and strong

⁹⁴ Daniel Madigan, *Revelation* in *EQ*, Vol.4, pp. 437-448, here at p. 437.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 441.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 445.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

opposition to the idea of canonising any one of them absolutely.⁹⁸

Trying to understand revelation according to the tradition is complex as theologians and commentators try to reconcile the absolute transcendence of God with some obviously human elements in the Qur'an. This has resulted in attempts to balance a series of tensions. According to Madigan:

The tradition wants to assert the immediacy of the revelation to the God who speaks, an immediacy on which it depends for its reliability. At the same time it recognises the mediation required logically and theologically by the absolute ontological distance between God and creation, and even the relative distance between the human and the angelic.⁹⁹

These tensions arise because the Qur'an has to reconcile its understanding of the utter transcendence of God, unmixed with anything human, with the fact that on another level it is also a very human document, embedded in the community that produced it. The text, for instance, has obvious cultural and linguistic particularity. The Arabic of the Qur'an is celebrated, yet it insists on its universal appeal and applicability. Some of its terms have special and temporal significance, yet at the same time tradition is aware of the problematic nature of attributing special and temporal characteristics to God. Another tension is the fact that the Qur'an maintains that it is unique, while at the same time asserting its commonality with earlier revealed Scriptures. Muslim tradition insists strongly that the Qur'an is the sole revealed Scripture to have been faithfully recorded and preserved in its original form, but at the same time the fact that only the unpointed consonanted text is canonised means that in effect the canon is kept open by the many possible pronunciations, some of which have doctrinal significance.¹⁰⁰ Madigan concludes that 'these tensions are a necessary factor in any theory of revelation because it must account at the same time for the divine and human aspects of the phenomenon.'¹⁰¹ These tensions can be resolved to some extent by employing the contextualist method which I describe below.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 446.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 447.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

3.6.3 Revelation and contextualisation

As has been emphasised above, Islam is concerned to maintain the transcendence of the divine, the wholly otherness of God, when describing the mode of revelation, but there is always an undeniably human element involved as well, in the context in which it is received. The contextualist method, whose underlying principles I will discuss in Chapter 8, can be applied to the subject of revelation, and may help shed some light on a difficult problem.¹⁰² According to Abdullah Saeed, most Muslim scholars in the past have accepted the traditional view of revelation, but a few, while accepting the Qur'an is exactly what God wanted to convey to humanity, have contended that the Prophet's role was not that of a mere recipient, one example being Ibn Sina (d.428/1037).¹⁰³

In modern times more scholars are coming to this view. Fazlur Rahman, for instance, said that '[o]rthodoxy... lacked the intellectual capacity to say both that the Qur'an is entirely the Word of God and in an ordinary sense, also the word of Muhammad'.¹⁰⁴ Rahman also asserts that 'Muslim theologians and commentators have misunderstood a number of key terms associated with revelation.'¹⁰⁵ Among these he would count the agent of revelation who was not an angel but the Spirit because, he argues, although angels are mentioned in the Qur'an, they are not agents of revelation. Rahman says that 'the Qur'an provides ample evidence that the "[r]evelation and its agent were spiritual and internal to the Prophet."¹⁰⁶ Central to his argument was the conviction that the Prophet played an active role in the production of the Qur'an.¹⁰⁷

Other modern scholars include Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohammed Arkoun, and Abu Zayd. According to Soroush, says Saeed, 'Modern Muslims need to recognise the human aspect of the revelation; for without it they will find it difficult to separate the immutable aspects of religion from

¹⁰² Abdullah Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach*, Routledge, London, 2014.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* Ch.5, *Revelation and Contextualisation*, pp. 53-63, here at p. 53.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54, quoting Rahman's *Islam*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1966, p31

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, quoting *Major Themes*, p. 100

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 55

those that are mutable.¹⁰⁸ Central to his argument is that the Prophet played an active role in the production of the Qur'an. He says:

Through the mind of the Prophet, revelation is adapted to its environment; it is shaped in no insignificant measure by the Prophet's personal history, his life's tribulations, and his state of mind during the years of his mission... the process of adaptation to the environment is therefore central to any theory of revelation.¹⁰⁹

And according to Mohammad Arkoun; 'There is no way to find the absolute outside the social, political condition of human beings and the mediation of language.'¹¹⁰ Abu Zayd argues that revelation is essentially a dialogue and therefore 'is required to be commensurate with the cultural, intellectual and linguistic horizons of the first recipients.'¹¹¹

Saeed remarks that the above arguments of contemporary scholars would be considered heretical by traditionalists but nevertheless, '[i]n the face of much contemporary thinking about language, mind and psychology, perhaps it will be difficult to sustain the traditional theory in the way it is usually presented.'¹¹² Therefore it is necessary to proceed with care, respecting the traditional view but being open to new insights. As he explains:

Given the difficult position for many thinkers and scholars who are arguing for a contextualist approach while remaining firmly within the fold of mainstream Muslim theological tradition, there is a need to develop an understanding of revelation that takes into account key aspects of traditional theory and some of the insights of contemporary scholars like Rahman.¹¹³

Saeed has devised his own rather complex solution to this problem, whereby he envisages the revelation of the Qur'an happening in four stages. The first takes place in the Unseen (al-ghayb), from whence the Spirit (understood to be the angel of revelation) brings it to the Prophet. Before this, in the Unseen, it was 'beyond human understanding or comprehension' existing in a 'code' or 'language' inaccessible to human beings. In the second stage it was uttered to the 'heart' of the Prophet, in Arabic. This utterance should also be attributed to the Spirit, and whether at this stage

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p56.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

the Qur'an is created or uncreated, 'the critical issue is that the Qur'an exists for us, human beings, in human language, addressing us as human beings, addressing our human concerns... in a form we can relate to and that enables us to connect with the Qur'an.'¹¹⁴ On the third level it becomes part of daily life. It was memorised and acted upon and became part of a living community. This is the 'actualisation' of the revelation. On the fourth level Saeed envisages communities continuing to add to and elaborate what the Revelation meant. He continues: 'Many interpretive communities have emerged among Muslims and they each carry an element of revelatory authority which can contribute to a better understanding of the Qur'an and may be considered as an indirect expansion of the original revelation.'¹¹⁵

This way of understanding revelation draws it a little closer to the Christian understanding where it is seen as combining the wholly other, transcendent God and the human in the person of Jesus Christ. The contextualist approach to Scripture, as described above, resembles the way Christian scholars, and others, have studied the Bible in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the spiritual message through examining the circumstances of its coming into being, and the 'authors', in this case many rather than one, as with Muhammad in Islam. Finally it is good to remember that the Qur'an and the Bible are not primarily objects of study, but sacred documents to draw the reader (or hearer) closer to God. We now return to *L'Islam et Nous*.

3.7 The Qur'an

3.7.1 The traditional view

Jean-Mohammed begins by reiterating the accepted view in Islam that 'the Qur'an was "received" by Muhammad to transmit to the Arabs and then to all men.'¹¹⁶ But he makes us aware, without going into too much detail, that there were to begin with several readings, and the fact that there is now only one accepted version is due to the fact that at certain periods the alternatives were destroyed, but this is not generally accepted because 'modern critics do not believe there is

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57/8.

¹¹⁶ *L'Islam et Nous* p. 34

sufficient reason to doubt the “received” text.’¹¹⁷ Muhammad, it is generally understood, is simply ‘the almost totally passive instrument, in the reception of the “book”, which binds Muslims together.’¹¹⁸ He does not present himself, like Jesus, as one ‘teaching with authority (Matt. 7:29), Master of the Sabbath (Lk.6:5) and the Law (Matt.5:17).’¹¹⁹

The way of life of Muslims, Jean-Mohammed continues, consists in accepting this book - not in imitating the man who transmitted to them its contents (as is the case in Christianity with Jesus and the Gospels). It is their ‘one thing necessary’ (Lk.10:42).¹²⁰ Unfortunately, however, this idea has been taken too far, as he now explains: ‘Some obscure words of the Qur’an (we are not given any references) have led Muslims to a veneration of this Book which verges on adoration, for it is “the Word of God”, “the copy of a heavenly original co-eternal with God”, the “mother of the Scriptures”’.¹²¹ It came to be believed that the actual text had a divine character: ‘the sounds, the letters that represent them, the ink, the parchment, even the gilding and the binding were thought to be uncreated.’¹²² Generally, however, the orthodox view is that ‘the Word of God is in itself uncreated, but what serves to exteriorise it is created.’¹²³ That alternative, extreme view, however, cannot be ignored, ‘as it powerfully influences the mind of Muslims – it helps us understand the cult they have for their sacred book, and the preeminent place it occupies in their lives; they even give it greater recognition than Muhammad, who is only a simple messenger and bearer of the divine text.’¹²⁴

There follow here some reflections, including from Hassan and Kenneth Cragg, on the Qur’an, which complement and develop what Jean-Muhammad has said.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* This is a very complex, ongoing area of study. For a succinct but enlightening summary see *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’an*, Ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, especially part 1, *Formation of the qur’anic text*, pp.23-78. See also Kenneth Cragg, *The Event of the Qur’an: Islam in its Scripture*, pub. Oneworld, Oxford, 1994.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 35.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.* p. 36.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 36.

3.7.2 The 'eternity' and inerrancy of the Qur'an, unmixed with anything human

Jewish/Christian revelation may appear to a Muslim as inferior to revelation as understood by Muslims because the Qur'an, in the traditional understanding, is the word of God dictated directly to a passive Prophet. This for them guarantees that it really is God's word, unmixed with anything human, and as a consequence must be completely free from error. This word derives from a 'heavenly template' (Q88:22), which is made known in book form to humankind, always with the same message, given at various times, and is ultimately destined for everyone (Q38:87, 68:52, 81:27).¹²⁵ Hassan has addressed this problem in his book *Chimes of Church Bells*, in which he stresses how much the word of God, in Christianity, is mixed with all that is human. In the context of the question of letters, for instance, becoming sacred Scripture he says:

For Muslim friends who have a specific understanding of divine revelation it is incredibly difficult to understand how it is possible for the word of God to descend to the earth in the form of letters sent by various people. An important starting point is to recognise that whilst the purpose of divine revelation is partly to present laws and religious principles to be obeyed, to encourage belief and to highlight historical events, the greatest aim of all revelation is to establish a relationship between God and his people... the meaning of inspiration cannot be expressed correctly without linking it to the way it is received. Divine inspiration and revelation are only brought to completion when they are mixed with the lives of people and bring about a result. In the letters by Paul the disciple and other writers in the first century of Christianity, there is a strong link between divine inspiration and the effect which these revelations have on the lives of the people. Throughout the letters the focus is on the divine word and its practical significance, not through the dictation of a scribe but by the application of principles to issues affecting members of the church and their learning and growth, with the help of the Holy Spirit.¹²⁶

The chief question concerning the written word that has preoccupied Muslim theologians, whose Scripture is perceived as not being touched by anything human, is whether the Arabic language of the Qur'an was sacred in itself, or whether it was an ordinary human language assumed by God to express his divine word, and if so, was the Qur'an created or uncreated?¹²⁷ This question has not been a preoccupation of Christianity, as the language of Scripture is not sacred in itself, but simply a means of transmitting revelation so that the recipient could understand it.

¹²⁵ Chawcat Moucarray, *Faith to Faith: Christianity and Islam in Dialogue*, Leicester, Intervarsity Press 2001, p. 26.

¹²⁶ *Chimes of Church Bells*, p. 5.

¹²⁷ See Caspar, *A Historical Introduction to Islamic Theology: Muhammad and the Classical Period*, Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamica, Rome 1998., p. 36/7.

This question of the admixture of the divine word with humanity goes back to the very beginnings of Islam and its understanding of *tawhid*, the doctrine of the 'Oneness' of God. Kenneth Cragg discusses this issue in *The Call of the Minaret*. How, he asks, was physical causality to be understood, for instance? Was God directly involved in every event of nature, such as the falling of a leaf or the healing of a wound? Or did 'nature' take over, independently of God's action? 'The modern Muslim', says Cragg, understands these eventualities as an aspect of authority given to the human race in the Qur'an, but in earlier times, 'in order to preserve the principle of divine unity' Muslims were required 'to believe that all these multifarious events issued directly from the action of God.'¹²⁸ Where revelation is involved the problem was more serious and caused 'bitter controversy'.¹²⁹ When Muslims spoke of 'God's word', or 'God's will', they asked whether, in order to preserve the divine unity, these things existed apart from God, or were they, like God himself, divine? From this debate arose the question of the status of the Qur'an; was it created or eternal? Finally the orthodox view came down in favour of the latter, but, says Cragg;

More adventurous thinkers, who were finally overcome, were impressed with the problem of regarding as eternal that which was involved in temporal issues, in the fortunes of specific battles and the domestic relationships of specific families. If these occasions in time were themes or points of revelation, were they somehow eternal also?¹³⁰

This problem applied equally to divine Names and attributes, such as 'kind', 'gracious' and 'wise'. When applied to God did these terms mean the same as when we apply them to a human being? 'To answer with an unqualified yes', says Cragg, 'seems to bring God and the human race too close together and so compromise transcendence and otherness', which could amount to 'an indirect form of *shirk* [idolatry].'¹³¹ Classical Muslim theology developed an idea for addressing this problem, in the concept of *Al-Mukhala*, which means 'the difference', by means of which 'terms taken from human meanings... were said to be used of God with a difference.'¹³² However it was not exactly clear what these terms meant when applied to God, and so 'Muslim theology created the

¹²⁸ *The Call of the Minaret*, p. 47/8.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

related phrases *Bila kaif* and *Bilah Tashbih*, which mean 'without knowing how.', because they are applied 'without implying any human similarity.'¹³³

In the end the matter was reduced to the 'unknowability' of God. In the words of Cragg:

In a real sense the Muslim awareness of God is an awareness of the unknown. Revelation communicated God's law. It does not reveal God, who remains inscrutable and inaccessible to knowledge. Sometimes described as the negative theology, this conviction that only God knows the sense of the terms in which we speak of God has characterized Muslim attitudes far beyond the range of those who can understand its intellectual grounds. If some readers find the point under discussion abstruse, they can be assured that it attaches to the Muslim sense of God in everyday life. Only God Knows.¹³⁴

Cragg goes on to make the point that this question of applying human language to God is not exclusive to Islam, but applies in Christianity also, and in fact to all religions. What do Christians understand when they say 'God is Love', for instance? Are we to understand that the love of God is the same as human love? Cragg makes the point that such problems as these can only be solved 'within the conviction that the divine and the human are truly meaningful to each other', so that somehow a knowledge of human love must help us to understand God's love, that is to say, 'the relationships God has with us are really indicative of the divine nature.'¹³⁵ However, in the final analysis, the Muslim dictum 'Only God Knows' is as applicable in Christianity as it is in Islam.

3.8 The Idealisation of Muhammad

Having discussed the Qur'an, Jean-Mohammed now returns to the question of the Prophet, dealing specifically with what he calls his 'idealisation'. This will be followed by some reflections from a general Christian perspective.

Having just stated that the Prophet is only a messenger, subsidiary to the message he brings, Jean-Mohammed now elaborates on the fact that Muslims give him virtually as much honour as Christians give Jesus Christ, who is believed by them to be God incarnate. He begins by pointing out the profound difference between the two texts, the Qur'an and the Gospels. He states that the Gospel, 'the true contents of which were probably not known to Muhammad, is the *life* of Christ, the

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

Word of the Father, and the essence of the Christian religion is to adhere with all one's being and activity to this Person.'¹³⁶ That is to say, it is not just a message of another prophet. Jean-Mohammed then gives the opinion that the founder of Islam 'presents Christ as a prophet who has "received" a "Book" to transmit to men; this book is the Gospel (*Injil*), but in this he is mistakenly reproducing what he makes of his own mission.'¹³⁷

Later Islam, Jean-Mohammed believes, had contact with Christians who may have been heretical, and the Gospel they possessed 'deformed and questionable', but 'by a sort of emulation more or less conscious, they more and more elevated its founder (i.e. of Islam).'¹³⁸ This gradual glorification of Muhammad goes so far as to make him 'the end of creation, the universal mediator of God's work', and he is described in terms almost identical with the words used by St Paul of Christ; 'born before every creature, he is first in everything' (Col.1:15,18).¹³⁹ This 'barely disguised parallelism with Christ' has resulted in some imitation of Christianity in liturgical matters, such as the institution of a Feast of the Nativity of Muhammad, and has gone so far as to 'affirm his (Muhammad's) impeccability and his mediation here below which will become intercession at the last judgement.'¹⁴⁰ Following on from this glorification, something similar to the Christian practice of the imitation of Christ came into being, that is, the 'imitation of Muhammad', so that very soon Muslim life had two poles of reference; 'the Qur'an on the one hand, and on the other, the teaching – both by word and example – of a tradition going back to Muhammad.'¹⁴¹ Jean-Mohammed is not blind to the fact that the Prophet is 'still a man, albeit a man apart; a man who has all the weaknesses of other men, including anger and sensuality', but that in spite of this, Muslims in general hold that 'he could never have sinned or been wrong: or if he did, for a moment, sin, all his sins are completely remitted.'¹⁴² The implication is that such a man could not possibly be so sinless.

¹³⁶ *L'Islam et Nous* p. 38.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* note 1

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38/39.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

The words used are what the New Testament would apply to Christ, who really is believed to be, in his human/divine nature 'like us in everything but sin' (Heb.4:15).¹⁴³

Jean-Mohammed concludes this section with the words, 'In short, Muhammad is superior to all men, and must serve as their model, not only in the accomplishment of prescribed rites and certain exterior practices and customs, but still more as moral guide, and even as a mystical guide.'¹⁴⁴

The way Muslims see Muhammad undoubtedly causes problems for Christians, because Jesus is only elevated to such heights in the eyes of Christians because he is believed to have divine status. In their eyes it would be blasphemy to attribute a similar status, as Jean-Mohammed has been describing, to the Prophet Muhammad. Hence it is a very sensitive area of dialogue, where Christians need to show profound respect for the Prophet as God's chosen instrument, without putting him on the same level as Jesus. The two men, as founders of religious communities, could not be more different.

3.8.1 Christian difficulties concerning the Prophet Muhammad

A participant (unnamed) at a 1975 seminar bringing together participants from Al-Azhar in Cairo, and the Vatican, said the following:

There is an issue that disturbs Muslims more than any other in their approach to Christians... it is the silence and reserve of Christians regarding Muhammad. He is for Muslims the last and greatest of the Prophets. Christian reticence on this subject surprises and scandalises them. They do not understand why we refuse to grant to the person of Jesus...¹⁴⁵

This quotation summarises the problem very succinctly, and although the conference took place almost fifty years ago, it is likely the same attitude is still very prevalent. How may this issue be addressed today? Are there any obvious reasons why it should be, and how may it be overcome?

First of all, it needs to be emphasised that Christians need to try and understand how much Muhammad means to Muslims, and approach the topic with a certain empathy. It has been, for instance, a surprise to some to witness the strong reaction from Muslims when the Prophet is

¹⁴³ *Ibid* . Cf also 2.Cor:5:21, 'For our sake he made him to be sin, who knew no sin.'

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁴⁵ Kenneth Cragg, *Muhammad and the Christian*, Preface, p. viii.

dishonoured in any way, or Islam as a religion 'insulted.' When Christianity, or Jesus in particular, are 'insulted', why is there not a similar reaction from Christians? It is perhaps not that they do not feel insulted, hurt, or offended, but it is something to be expected and accepted, at least sometimes, because of the words and example of Jesus. 'Insult' is part of Jesus' life story, which culminated in his death on the cross. And he taught his followers to expect persecution: 'If they persecute me, they will persecute you too.' (Jn.15:20), and when this happens they should not retaliate: 'When struck on one cheek, offer the other.' (Lk.6:29). Therefore it is easy for a Christian to judge Muslims in this matter by 'Christian' standards, even though they themselves may fall far short in the practice of the standard set by Jesus in the Gospels.

In the second instance, a lack of due appreciation of the Prophet Muhammad on the part of Christians could be because he appears nowhere in the New Testament.¹⁴⁶ By contrast Jesus is mentioned many times in the Qur'an and is a familiar, highly revered prophet. Jesus in the Qur'an is a big topic, not to be dealt with here, except to say that he is no stranger to Muslims, despite the fact that they deny him the status of Son of God. Therefore Christians do not have the same familiarity with Muhammad that Muslims have with Jesus. Christianity in fact would seem to be complete in itself without any reference to Islam or Muhammad, but Islam must adopt an approach to Christianity, if only to emphasise that Jesus is *not* divine.

Thirdly, a Christian steeped in the words and deeds of Jesus as related in the gospels, may experience a 'culture shock' on encountering Muhammad who, as the leader of another major religion, could not be more different in character, lifestyle, and career.

3.8.2 Character and Mission: a profound difference between Jesus and Muhammad

Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil has written about the Prophet of Islam at some length in *L'Islam et Nous*, but not without criticism.¹⁴⁷ He notes, for instance, that 'Muhammad used temporal and political means, wars, diplomacy, and sometimes cruelty, to impose himself on the

¹⁴⁶ However it is claimed that the coming of Muhammad is foretold in the promise of the Paraclete (Jn.14:26), but there is no textual evidence to support this claim. See Moucarray, *op.cit.*, p. 246/7 where the issue is discussed, and also Hassan's explanation quoted in Ch.7 of thesis.

¹⁴⁷ *L'Islam et Nous*, pp. 37-45.

whole of Arabia.¹⁴⁸ And this idea of war 'approved by Allah has profoundly marked the Muslim ideal.'¹⁴⁹ Thus may a Muslim, as Jean-Mohammed still considers himself to be, despite his conversion to Christianity, feel entitled to speak about the Prophet of Islam. To speak in this manner would not befit an 'outsider', especially a Christian who wishes to dialogue with Islam. However, before profound differences become apparent, we can find similarities with Jesus' life in Muhammad's persecution and suffering in the early part of his ministry in Mecca, but that all changed when he went to Medina and formed the first political entity. Kenneth Cragg has said of this period of his life, that 'Muhammad relied confidently on the legitimate role of the power-structure.'¹⁵⁰ Jesus, on the other hand, laid down a principle of the separation of State and religion when he replied to a questioner, 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.' (Matt.22.21). By this, however:

He did not mean that Caesar's realm was one of divine indifference, an autonomy absolved of all transcendent reference. On the contrary, he meant that the things of God, in their inclusiveness, cannot be identified with the interests of Caesar or entrusted to his ways. It was Muhammad's understanding of the 'things of God' which, after the Hijrah, put away that distinction. In his own person he saw them compatible.¹⁵¹

The only violent episode recorded in Jesus' life was when he went into the Temple one day and 'drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves.' (Matt. 21:12) He also used very provocative language when addressing the Jewish establishment. It could be argued that as a Jew speaking to fellow Jews, he could do this in a way a non-Jew could not. It should also be emphasised that he was not attacking the establishment as such, but the rigidity of the Jewish leaders in the keeping of the Law – a religious matter. He did not speak in the same provocative manner to the Romans, to whom he was, effectively, a foreigner, nor did he anywhere rail against the Roman occupation of Palestine. When he was being tried before Pontius Pilate, for instance, he remained largely silent. In this he was a great disappointment to his Jewish compatriots, since, having claimed to be the Messiah, he would

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Muhammad and the Christian: a Question of Response*, Oxford, Oneworld, 1999 (first printed 1984), p. 159.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

have nothing to do with any movement to remove the Romans from Palestine by force. On the road to Emmaus after his resurrection, two downcast disciples approached Jesus, whom they did not recognise, and began lamenting about the dreadful events that had just happened in Jerusalem. The one they thought was a great prophet, who would 'redeem Israel', had now met an ignominious death by crucifixion. Jesus began his response with the words, 'You foolish men!' (Lk.24.25). He did in fact go on to 'conquer' Rome, but not by force of arms. Rather it was through the conversion of an Emperor who stopped the persecution of Christians and allowed Christianity to spread throughout the Empire.

3.8.3 The 'Idealisation' of Muhammad, continued

Despite the marked difference between the two founders, one being a politician and military leader which he combined with being a religious leader and man of God; the other certainly the latter but also a poor man, a village carpenter who met a tragic end which seemed to spell the failure of his whole mission. Kenneth Cragg has also dealt with this issue, no less critically than Jean-Mohammed, yet with sympathy and an effort to understand.¹⁵² He speaks of:

the deep personal devotion to Muhammad which is so central an element in the whole religion of Islam. In treating of Muhammad, he [the Christian] must know that he is moving within a sanctuary of soul-wonder. He is handling heart's love. But there can be no doubt that the Muhammad of Islamic mysticism and devotion indicates how close, in that area, Islam comes to the instincts, though not the content, of Christian theology.¹⁵³

Jean-Mohammed, despite his predominantly negative attitude to the Prophet (which did not exclude respect), made a point of retaining his Muslim name, Mohammed, in combination with the name Jean (John), which he took at his Christian baptism, which speaks eloquently of his loyalty and love of his former religion. As Maurice Borrmans, who knew him personally, says of him: 'he wishes to unite in himself two countries, Morocco and France, and two spiritualities, Muslim and Christian.'¹⁵⁴ And, his name in itself speaks of a 'double fidelity'.¹⁵⁵ Names, especially when personally chosen (or perhaps given) as when entering religious life, speak more eloquently than lengthy explanations.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, Ch.4, *Muhammad in the Soul*, pp. 53-65.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 53, 58.

¹⁵⁴ *Témoignage du Coran et de l'Évangile*, op.cit. p. 15.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

Jean-Mohammed could easily have dropped the Prophet's name at this time but chose not to. His positive, or at least non-critical attitude, comes out in his early correspondence with his mentor Mulla-Zadé during his conversion process. In his first letter to the latter, Jean-Mohammed simply questions how his correspondent sees the Prophet and his mission. He himself 'does not know what to think.'¹⁵⁶ He continued, 'I believe him to be sincere, although I do not give him my allegiance anymore.' He goes on to speak about 'one of his tutors in Paris' who spoke of Muhammad's 'semi-supernatural mission'. But 'what is this semi-supernatural state?' he asks.¹⁵⁷ In his very lengthy reply to Jean-Mohammed's concerns of a doctrinal nature, Mulla-Zadé confines his reply on this topic to a postscript, as it is 'not essential for present purposes.'¹⁵⁸ He does not see anything wrong with the expression 'semi-supernatural' to describe Muhammad's mission, but apart from considering him inferior to Jesus, refuses to endorse many current negative criticisms, such as that he suffered from 'hallucinations', was an 'imposter', or 'suffered from epilepsy.'¹⁵⁹ There have been many theories, predominantly among Christians, which purported to demonstrate that Muhammad was not a genuine prophet. Many of these revolved around mental health issues. During his moments of 'trance', for instance, his words 'were uttered with great force, in the grip of superhuman energies, which made both himself and his hearers believe in a divine origin.'¹⁶⁰ Sometimes the issue can become very delicate for dialogue, so that out of discretion at one point the author says in a footnote, "For the contemporary period we prefer to mention no names."¹⁶¹ It was no doubt a similar instinct for discretion which prompted the silence of the two correspondents on this matter.

¹⁵⁶ Mulla-Zadé, *op.cit.*, p. 17.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p17. Maurice Borrmans comments in a footnote (note 1, p. 17) that he is 'without any doubt referring to professor Louis Massignon of the Collège de France, who also referred to Muhammad as a 'negative prophet'. Louis Massignon's ideas greatly influenced Vatican II in its attitude to Islam, but these ideas were not adopted. In *Nostra Aetate* a discreet silence was maintained over the status of the Prophet of Islam.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26. Letter of 14/15 October 1927.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁶⁰ Caspar, *A Historical Introduction to Islamic Theology: Muhammad and the Classical Period, op.cit.*, p. 11. For a comprehensive overview of this topic see Ch.V, *Muhammad's Prophetic Office and The Inspired Nature of the Qur'an: A Problem of Christian Theology*, pp. 89-134. A lengthy bibliography concludes the chapter.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 113, footnote 40.

It seems, therefore, that the problem concerning a generally ambivalent attitude towards Muhammad on the part of Christians cannot easily be resolved. However, there may be a way forward, albeit indirect, which is through Mary, the mother of Jesus, who is highly revered in both Islam and Christianity.¹⁶²

3.8.4 Mary, the Mother of Jesus, a 'bridge' between Muhammad and Jesus?

Mary (Maryam in Arabic), is 'the most prominent female figure in the Qur'an and the only one identified by name.'¹⁶³ She is mentioned several times and has a whole *sura* named after her (Q19). Seventy verses in various places in the Qur'an refer to her, and she is mentioned specifically in thirty four.¹⁶⁴ These facts are in themselves remarkable, and should draw Christians to read the Qur'an, out of curiosity if for no other reason. On the girlhood and childbearing of Mary passages of great beauty will be found there, and despite differences from the Christian presentation in the gospels, it is clear that Mary may be able to unite Muslims and Christians in a less divisive way than her son. In confirmation of this, I draw on some interesting comments from a little known paper on some aspects of Mariology by Jean Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil.¹⁶⁵

The 'problems', though interesting, will not be discussed here, but only some references made by the author to the passage in the Qur'an (3.41) which says 'O Mary, God has chosen you and purified you, and raised you above all the women in the world.' The 'traditions', unsurprisingly, have not always been at ease with this assertion, and generally 'reflect the hesitations of the Muslim conscience', since they believed the Founder of Islam would surely have given preference to Khadija, Muhammad's first wife, Aisha, his youngest, favourite wife, or Fatima his daughter.¹⁶⁶ The 'traditionalists' duly record all the texts that indicate their pre-eminence, but at the same time they

¹⁶² In fact this is already happening, in such things as joint visits of Muslims and Christians to Marian shrines.

¹⁶³ Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *EQ* Vol.3, *Mary*, pp. 288-95, here at p. 288.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Problèmes de Mariologie en Islam*. I am grateful to Jane Dammen McAuliffe for the gift of this manuscript which is inscribed in the handwriting of Abd-e-Jalil indicating his intention to give it to 'Monsieur Michael Wickens', who was the research supervisor of McAuliffe. It is dated 3 March 1949 and consists of 14 printed pages. It was published in *Bulletin des Missions*, III, 1948, pp. 110-123. I am grateful to Fr Maurice Borrmans for locating this reference.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

‘scrupulously reproduce’ and insert within the tradition certain variants of this theme. In one of them Fatima reports words which she claims her father addressed to her before his death. He said, ‘You will be the highest woman in Paradise after Mary.’¹⁶⁷ In another tradition Aisha enumerates all her privileges, which are more than any other woman has received, yet she says, ‘I have been given more than all women... except Mary.’ There is much more to say on this matter, says Jean-Mohammed, and some of it is polemical, but ‘it is not polemics which will bring peace to the spirit, and dispose it for fruitful study and meditation.’ There must be a ‘loyal effort at mutual comprehension’, and Christians for their part must ‘witness heroically in living a Christian life... which is necessary today more than ever.’¹⁶⁸ The same can be said today, almost seventy years after this article was written. And it is good to note that Marian devotion is still strong in both Christianity and Islam.

Some comments might also be added about Mary in revelation. In the Qur’an, for instance, ‘[t]he lyrical depiction of Mary is by far the most complete and nuanced female portrait to be found there’, and ‘the main motifs are sketched in tones of respect and sentiment.’¹⁶⁹ And in the New Testament:

The few spare but nevertheless central statements about Mary have burrowed deeply into the hearts of the faithful of every century and have found a resounding echo in Christian spirituality of every age. Mary herself prophetically predicted: ‘From now on all generations shall call me blessed’ (Luke 1:48).¹⁷⁰

Surah Three of the Qur’an contains a verse which may be seen as ‘the acme of the Qur’anic exaltation of Mary: ‘Then the angel said, ‘O Mary, truly God has chosen you and purified you and chosen you over the women of mankind.’ (3.41).¹⁷¹ This verse has caused considerable controversy in Islamic exegesis, not least because Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet, is not even mentioned by name in the Qur’an. As might be expected, Sunni and Shi’a exegesis on Mary differs because of the

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* The quote is from IBN SA’D, *iTabaqât*, II, I, p. 40. See footnote (39)

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁶⁹ Jane Dammen McAuliffe. ‘Mary, Chosen of All Women: Mary and Fatima in Qur’anic Exegesis’, in *Islamochristiana* 7, Rome, PISAI, 1981, pp. 19-27, here at p. 19.

¹⁷⁰ Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, New York, Paulist press, 1913, Ch.IX, ‘Mary, Mother of Mercy’, pp. 207-218, here at p211.

¹⁷¹ McAuliffe, *op.cit.*, p. 19.

supremely important role played by Fatima as belonging to the Prophet's family, which is a supremely important consideration for the Shi'a. Sunni exegetes, for instance al-Tabari (839-923), generally claim that Mary's pre-eminence is only over the women of her time, but Fakhr al-Din al Razi (1149-1209) admits that this neglects the literal meaning of the text, whereas Muhammad Rashid Rida (1875-1935) implies that Mary, Khadija and Fatima are eternally of equal importance. The fact that Mary conceived Isa without a father is another reason given for her pre-eminence.¹⁷²

Shi'i exegesis generally holds that 'over all mankind' applies only to Mary's own time. This is the view of Abu al Futuh Razi (1087-1131), who insists on the 'absolute pre-eminence of Fatima' over women of all time, 'because she is part of the body of the Messenger and what is part of the Messenger is not equal to what is part of Imran.'¹⁷³ A modern exegete, Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i (b. 1903), considers that the reason for Mary's pre-eminence is the birthing of Jesus. He never makes any comparison with Fatima and dismisses the repeated argument that Mary's precedence is over the women of her own time only, as being inconsistent with the literal meaning of the text.¹⁷⁴ It is to be lamented, however, that a very modern, otherwise excellent, English translation, has inserted these words into the text, which reads: 'He has selected you over all the women of your time.'¹⁷⁵

Despite these differing views over Mary's pre-eminence over the most revered women in Islam, she is undoubtedly held in high esteem in both Islam and Christianity, and well able to serve as a 'bridge', and even more, an intercessor.

3.9 Religious Authority

This section is another heading in *L'islam et Nous*, and deals with the very complex area of *Shari'a*, Islamic law and decision making. From Jean-Mohammed's brief description it is easy to see that there is no real uniformity of belief in Islam, and it is very difficult to discern what is orthodox.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 20/21.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.* p. 23

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 23/24.

¹⁷⁵ The Qur'an, translated by Shaikh Wahiduddin Khan, Goodwork Books, New Delhi, 2009. reprinted 2011.

It is clearly a matter for specialists. Some Christians have studied Islamic law in depth,¹⁷⁶ but for the vast majority of Christians this area is virtually inaccessible. *Shari'a* has two complementary aspects; it is a way of life ordained by God for the whole of mankind, the 'straight path' of Islam (Q1:6) accessible to all, but it is also the canonical law of Islam, developed from principles contained in the Qur'an, or examples provided by the *sunna* of the Prophet, combined with analyses made subsequently by the four major schools of Islamic jurisprudence, these being the Hanifi, Hanbali, Maliki and Shafi'a Schools.¹⁷⁷

To a large extent, Jean-Mohammed claims, this situation of confusion is a direct result of the undue exaltation of Muhammad as described in the previous section. 'Because the *sunna*, (the theoretical and practical teaching of Muhammad not contained in the Qur'an) can abrogate the revealed text itself', all sorts of confusion can occur.¹⁷⁸ 'Islam now finds itself', he says 'defenceless against the infiltration of eccentric elements, various deviations, and the intrusion of foreign elements.'¹⁷⁹ Moreover, to make the situation more difficult, 'Islam does not allow itself any real hierarchy. It has neither priesthood nor a living magisterium, and no official subordination among the different members of the different groups.'¹⁸⁰ And so 'divisions and deviations easily penetrate this system'.¹⁸¹

Parallel to this situation, 'official Islam has established itself in the rigid and narrow framework of the "revelation" and the "tradition", the one considered to be divine and eternal, the other as a completely perfect, ideal model (i.e. the Prophet), which cannot be altered and precludes development. And thus comes about a crystallisation of law and dogma which seems to bind it to the past and make it incapable of adapting itself, without making essential alterations, to the

¹⁷⁶ Maurice Borrmans M.Afr. for instance, one of the founders of the Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islam, has a doctorate from the Sorbonne on an aspect of Islamic law. See *Islamochristiana* 13 (1987).

¹⁷⁷ Edward D.A. Hulmes, *Encyclopaedia of Islamic Civilisation and Religion*, ed. Ian Richard Netton, London, Routledge, first published 2008, this edition 2010, p. 592.

¹⁷⁸ *L'Islam et Nous*, p. 41, note 1.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

evolution of humanity.¹⁸² There are certain principles which allow for renewal and adaptation, which Jean-Mohammed briefly describes, but for the ‘outsider’ they are almost impossible to grasp, and to complicate matters, the *ulamâ*, the ‘doctors of the law’, who concern themselves with these matters, ‘do not at all resemble priests and other teachers in the Church of Christ; they are lay people among other lay people who are hierarchically their equals, and the spiritual care of the faithful and the guarding of a doctrinal deposit in reality is confided to no one.’¹⁸³ In confirmation of this Jean-Mohammed quotes the Qur’an in a footnote; ‘We have caused revelation to descend, and we are its sure guardians. (15.9)’¹⁸⁴

A short discussion follows about the caliphate; at present non-existent but always something aspired to. The caliph is not to be thought of, we are advised, as some sort of ‘Muslim pope’...he is simply the “executor” of the divine law.¹⁸⁵ Jean-Mohammed then reports that (at the time when he was writing, in the 1940’s), ‘there is still much discussion about the restoration of the caliphate’,¹⁸⁶ such as creating a union among the Arab countries (The Arab League), and rapprochement among all Muslim countries...’who recognise five obligations: the witness that God is one, daily prayer and Friday prayer, almsgiving, fasting and pilgrimage.’¹⁸⁷

3.10 Religious Life

What is referred to in this section, which follows on from the above, is not religious life such as monastic life or the many religious orders as understood in Christianity. Jean-Mohammed is giving an account here of the ordinary spiritual life of Muslims in the face of the fact that they have, as he has already described, ‘no sacred hierarchy, or legitimate teaching authority’, and that ‘sacrifice is likewise not a constitutive element of their worship’.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 42/3.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, note 1.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ Abolished on 3 March 1924.

¹⁸⁷ *L’Islam et Nous*, p. 45. In a footnote, we are referred to ‘the second part’, i.e. *Aspects intérieurs de L’Islam*, in which he describes the pilgrimage to Mecca, which he himself accomplished as a child, including all the prayers that are said.

¹⁸⁸ *L’Islam et Nous* p. 46.

3.10.1 Sacrifice and Martyrdom

In a densely packed footnote relating to the above Jean-Mohammed speaks about sacrifice and martyrdom, and he makes us aware, in a few words, that this is another area in which the differences between Islam and Christianity are huge. ‘The only “sacrifice” which Islam is accustomed to admit’, we are told, ‘is that of holy war (*jihâd*): “to die in the path of Allah”, that is to say, in fighting for the prevalence of “His Word”, that the whole world might submit to the authority of those who are faithful.’¹⁸⁹ He explains that this understanding developed to include ‘all who have undergone a violent or exceptional death while remaining faithful to Islam, even if it just is a matter of defending one’s family or possessions, or fighting injustice; it may even include victims of an epidemic, an accident, or the woman who dies in childbirth.’¹⁹⁰ An ‘etc.’ added here indicates that the idea of martyrdom could be even further extended. This is quite different from the Christian understanding of martyrdom. The Christians of the early Church, for instance, ‘voluntarily suffered death as the consequence of witnessing to and refusing to renounce their religion.’¹⁹¹ Raven continues his exposition of martyrdom to point out that ‘Christian martyrs were killed by hostile authorities in a period when their religion had no prospect of earthly success, whereas the early Sunni martyrs fell in battle during generally successful campaigns.’¹⁹² However it is pointed out that the Shi’a concept of martyrdom much more closely resembles that of Christianity. This is because it has been profoundly shaped by the case of ‘the martyr *par excellence*, Husayn, who was killed at Karbala in a heroic but predictably doomed battle against fellow Muslims. As for Christians, it is the spiritual victory in the face of a worldly defeat that matters.’¹⁹³ And in a similar way to Christianity, where martyrdom is always closely associated with the death and resurrection of Christ, ‘they [the Shia] often emphasise the redemptive character of Husayn’s martyrdom, whereas the intercession

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.* note 1

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ Wim Raven of the University of Frankfurt, See EQ, Vol.3, *Martyrs*, p. 281.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

of Sunni martyrs plays but a marginal role.¹⁹⁴ Today martyrdom is an ever present reality in both Islam and Christianity and is therefore something that can unite us rather than separate.

3.10.2 Formal worship: is God accessible?

There is a saying attributed to the Prophet, continues Jean-Mohammed, that 'acts only have value according to their intentions.'¹⁹⁵ But, he believes, 'Islam attributes too much importance to exterior acts and rites, to a manifest accomplishment of the law.'¹⁹⁶ Worship thus becomes 'mechanical, formalistic, and over-scrupulous.' It studies 'with a desperate meticulousness external qualities and faults.'¹⁹⁷ Nevertheless the pious Muslim 'recites the Qur'an constantly, by heart; its words are constantly applied to the concrete circumstances of their lives.'¹⁹⁸ Despite this, however, Jean-Mohammed says, the believer is 'left face to face with an inaccessible God in his absolute Transcendence.'¹⁹⁹ The believer has no means of progressing beyond this state of affairs; there is no grace that will make God truly approachable.²⁰⁰

Jean-Mohammed had a favourite expression that he frequently incorporated into his articles (though he does not quote it on this occasion) which highlights the way he has come to understand God as a Christian; he is in fact very accessible.²⁰¹ The original French, that God is *désirable*, *communicable et délectable*, translates rather clumsily into English; God is 'desirable, communicable, and delectable', but it would seem to express his 'Trinitarian' understanding of God. God is 'desirable', for it is in human nature to long to know him, even to have intimate communion with him, and moreover he actually wants to be known and loved. In this he is *communicable*; able to be in communion with his creatures. This would suggest, in Trinitarian terminology, the action of the Holy Spirit. Finally he is 'delectable'. This suggests the delight and joy the human person may experience in loving God and being in communion with him.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 281/2.

¹⁹⁵ *L'Islam et Nous*, p. 46/7.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ See Maurice Borrmans, *Témoignage*, p. 47.

There follows a brief discussion on the question of sin and God's mercy, and Sufism, whose adherents would seem to find God very accessible. The matter of sin and God's mercy is also discussed in the context of the Muslim understanding of God. The one unforgivable sin, says Jean-Mohammed, 'which finds its origin in the Qur'an, is expressed as "Allah does not forgive anyone who associates other divinities with him; the rest he forgives as he will." He describes this as 'a strange kind of mercy'.²⁰² This is a concept of mercy which Christians, undoubtedly, do not feel at home with, as it seems that their understanding of the Trinity might be blameworthy. The Christian Trinitarian way of understanding God is a major stumbling block on the path of dialogue. In this context of sin, whether by a Muslim or a Christian, Jean-Mohammed speaks of 'accommodations that have to be made in the Law of Allah.'²⁰³ It is a matter of sin 'hidden' between the delinquent and God, so that 'appearances are saved and there is no scandal... the concept of sin is thus rendered less alive.'²⁰⁴ This is not easy for the non-Muslim to understand, but it seems to be an illustration of the concentration on externals for the preservation of social order.²⁰⁵ However, what is clear is that the question of human sinfulness, and how we understand God's mercy in this regard, is another area of dialogue which presents considerable difficulties.

There then follows a discussion of the fact that some Muslims, at various times, have become 'interior souls', but these are mainly Sufis, such as Al-Hallaj (executed in Bagdad at the beginning of the tenth century), and Al-Ghazali (who died in 1111), and are the exceptions.²⁰⁶ The great effort at 'interiorisation' stops with the religious confraternities (i.e. Sufis).²⁰⁷ Sufism is a huge area of study, not to be developed here, except to note that it is arguably the 'contemplative' branch of Islam, where it is possible to know and experience God in a more intimate way than in the formal worship that is the subject of this section.

²⁰² *L'Islam et Nous* p. 47.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ As described by Jean-Mohammed at the beginning of this section. See *Ibid.*, p. 46/7.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.* p. 48/9.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

3.11 Holy War and Monotheism

In this section of this book, Jean-Mohammed returns once more to the topic of monotheism, so fundamental to Islam, this time in the context of Holy War. 'There is', says Jean-Mohammed, 'a saying attributable to the Prophet that the "great holy war" is against oneself, for the purpose of moral reform.'²⁰⁸ The other war, which consists in 'bringing Muslim domination to infidel territory', is the "little" holy war.²⁰⁹ But as he has explained in the previous section (The Religious Life), the possibility of having a really interior life, as would be expected in the 'great Holy War', is limited.

According to official doctrine, however, we are told, 'the real holy war is still the one waged against non-Muslims ... even though, temporarily at least, weapons are not being used and one may be content with more peaceful methods.'²¹⁰ But according to Jean-Mohammed, this is 'propaganda' created by those who wish to spread Islam by means of the written word, or missionary effort.²¹¹ It is pointed out that this 'offensive war' is not obligatory, but nevertheless it seems to be something deep in the Muslim character, for 'every "believer" carries in the depth of his soul something of the bellicose character of Muslim monotheism, the ambition of which is to impose itself throughout the world that all should know the pre-eminence of the Word of Allah.'²¹² This is what makes the Muslim; 'the profession of faith in the One God, (not as some think, the rite of circumcision) to which is added the recognition of the prophetic mission of Muhammad.'²¹³

This profession of faith is so important that at the moment of death it is enough to guarantee entry into paradise. To 'raise the finger of the right hand; this is all the "believer" needs to do. It is the indispensable "passport" to paradise.'²¹⁴ However, such attachment to this central tenet of Islam, Jean-Mohammed believes, can lead to the attitude that 'little else really matters if

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² *Ibid.*, p. 52/3.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

this is safeguarded.²¹⁵ He points out the contrast with Christianity, where faith is never isolated from hope, contrition, and charity; ‘morality and dogma are harmoniously and *organically* united.’²¹⁶ However, the Qur’an in fact does frequently mentions faith and good works in combination. As one scholar has said: ‘In the Qur’an there is a close connection between having faith and doing good works. The expression, “those who believe and do good works” is repeated in many verses, and such people are “the inhabitants of the garden; they will abide there eternally” (Q.2:82).’²¹⁷ In practice, however, as Jean-Mohammed indicates, this connection between faith and works is not ‘organic’ and can be severed. And as he has said earlier, the good works do not necessarily mean anything to God, for ‘God is not obliged to take account of the works of men, without for all that ceasing to be just. In fact, salvation is attained through faith alone.’²¹⁸ It is this ‘monotheistic faith, strict and rigid, stripped of all additions, which is the central point of the Muslim soul; this is the source of his pride, his desire for conquest, his bellicose character, from this is born the obligation of “holy war”’.²¹⁹

3.11.1 Monotheism and People of the Book

The next question to be considered by Jean-Mohammed in this section is how this strict monotheism of Islam affects its relations with other religions, especially Jews and Christians: ‘People of the Book’. These are tolerated and Muslim beliefs are not imposed on them, unlike some others who are subject to the ‘famous alternative (true in theory but not always put into practice), “Believe or die”, but they (Christians and Jews) must be placed under Muslim authority, made to pay taxes, and generally be “humiliated”’.²²⁰ He goes on to say that ‘this does not mean their doctrine [Islam] is not sullied with idolatry like other religions. Nevertheless all religions preceding Islam have been penetrated with *shirk*... of which they must be purified so that their belief coincides with that of

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ Janet I. Smith of Hartford Seminary, *EQ Faith*, Vol.2, p. 167.

²¹⁸ *L’Islam et Nous*, p. 28/9..

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

Islam. And the latter has the mission, till the end of time, to throw off these dark shadows.’²²¹ At this point Jean-Mohammed allows himself to express some strongly held views in a footnote: ‘It is most regrettable’, he says, ‘that Muslims in this day and age allow themselves to be satisfied with such summary judgements, and that the Qur’an does not insist that one take account of the “variations” on the subject of Christians and of the historical circumstances in which it either praises them or pronounces their condemnation. In our age scientific objectivity, the impartiality of historic enquiry, and a serious effort on both sides with a view to a more correct mutual understanding, would surely contribute towards a just, generous world, so hoped for, where good is accomplished.’ In fact’, he concludes, ‘we are beginning to see groups of Muslims and Christians who for several years have been trying to do this’.²²² Fortunately the same can be said in our own day with more emphasis, though undoubtedly there is still a long way to go.

3.11.2 Islam and Other Faiths

Jean-Mohammed then continues with the question of how Muslims perceive the relationship of Islam to other faiths. They think, he says, that ‘only Muslims have the right to speak of God, for they alone use the correct language which is appropriate for and maintains unaltered the Transcendence of the One God.’ And moreover, ‘because other religions, even the “peoples of the Scripture” have not held on to this doctrine in all its purity, nothing that they do has any value; prayers, works of charity, the contemplative life, all is “hollow” and “invalid”’.²²³ Jean-Mohammed then recounts how often ‘pious, sincere and disinterested Christians, missionaries or others, have received the pressing invitation: “*Aslim!* (Become a Muslim.)’²²⁴ However, rather than condemn this attitude, Jean-Mohammed calls it ‘naïve compassion, which is even admirable’, because it at least recognises there are good qualities and much virtue, despite the fact that the essential is lacking (i.e.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² *Ibid.* p. 55/6. Kenneth Cragg is also keen to emphasise the point that the Qur’an must be looked at in its historical circumstances. See for instance *The Event of the Qur’an: Islam in its Scripture*. To quote one example among many: ‘neutrality’ in any final sense is impossible, if there is to be revelation. For revelation, *ex hypothesi*, is inconceivable in a total abeyance of receptivity. Nor is such abeyance itself possible in life and history.’ See p. 27.

²²³ *L’Islam et Nous*, p. 56.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

pure monotheism).²²⁵

3.12 Some predominant Muslim traits of character

This section of Jean-Mohammed's book is rather wide-ranging and contains many 'hints and suggestions', for instance concerning the daily life of Muslims, their attitude to the goods of this world, and political matters, since Islam is concerned with all these matters, especially politics, rather more than Christianity. Here, in keeping with the thesis, commentary is restricted to what is more religious/theological, than the political etc.

3.12.1 Muslims as 'chosen'

The fundamental Muslim belief in God's Oneness as revealed in the Qur'an, together with the precepts for living, also revealed in the Qur'an, has a considerable psychological impact on individual Muslims. For 'every Muslim', says Jean-Mohammed, 'feels himself to be in possession of a creed, a legal and moral system which is an explanation of everything, a value judgement on the whole of history. Above all he feels "chosen", called to be the witness, and perhaps even the warrior, the champion, the "martyr" of the One God.'²²⁶ This is a 'fundamental characteristic ... found in all Muslims, whether the most ignorant or the most learned. It is a matter of *'le moi et non-moi'*.²²⁷ In the political sphere it translates into the familiar concept of "*dâr-l-islâm*" and the "*dâr-l-harb*"; that is to say, the 'abode of Islam' and the 'abode of war', and Islam recognises no limits less than the ends of the earth.'²²⁸ In a footnote, however, Jean-Mohammed concedes that 'now, Muslim peoples speak of peaceful cohabitation as equals with other peoples.'²²⁹ This of course is a very pressing issue today when Muslims and people of other persuasions mingle more than ever.

The attitude, described above, becomes part of Islam's apologetic in respect of other religions, in this case Christianity, which has already been 'judged and classified... it has been

²²⁵ *Ibid.* We might note here Jean-Mohammed's ambivalent attitude to Islam. He can be severely critical but at the same time he really loves and admires his former religion, still so much part of him.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

²²⁷ *Ibid.* This might be translated colloquially as 'them and us'.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 57/8.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

abrogated, corrected, and surpassed by Islam.²³⁰ And, 'for a Muslim, to convert to Christianity is a non-sense, a regression.'²³¹ Up to the present, Jean-Mohammed claims, 'most Muslims who have dared to embark on a study of Christianity, have done so with this prejudice.'²³² This certainty of always being right amounts to a 'superiority complex', and it is a 'very deep-rooted problem.'²³³

3.12.2 Fatalism

The majority of Muslims, at least in Muslim countries, have a tendency towards 'fatalism'. This is partly a result of the firm conviction that belief in the Oneness of God is sufficient by itself for salvation. Practicing the moral precepts of the Qur'an can lead to a certain elevated sense of morality, claims Jean-Mohammed, but it is carried out in a literal manner, very formally, and these precepts are not even known by large numbers of Muslims. Or else the inhibitive tendency to laziness takes over (a characteristic not monopolised by Muslims, he goes on to say). Fatalism is connected with all this, but a deeper cause is the heightened awareness of Muslims of the One God's transcendence which leads to the conviction that he infallibly intervenes in human history (and each individual life) with a will absolutely independent of all rational logic. This gives the appearance of an arbitrariness that can paralyse the believer. At its roots, what might here be called a doctrine of predestination, has analogies, says Jean-Mohammed, with a similar doctrine in Christianity.²³⁴

The above is a very complex area of Christian doctrine, and it is virtually impossible on the rational level to reconcile God's omniscience and foreknowledge with human free will. St Augustine believed predestination was a consequence of mankind's total dependence on grace, but the Church refused to endorse this aspect of his teaching. However the Protestant Reformers and John Calvin (1509-1564) took Augustine's position very seriously, but it is not orthodox Catholic doctrine.²³⁵

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

²³¹ *Ibid.*

²³² *Ibid.*, note 2.

²³³ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 59/60.

²³⁵ John H. Wright SJ, *Predestination, The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, Dermot A. Lane, Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 1990, p. 197/8.

3.12.3 Attitude to Sin

Another great difference which affects the Muslim mentality is the Islamic teaching concerning the attitude to sin. The fact that for them there is no doctrine of Original Sin means that they see human nature quite differently from the way Christians perceive it. Adam did indeed disobey God in the garden, as in Christianity, but he was punished and repented. As Jean-Mohammed has said in the previous section, a simple recognition of the Oneness of God is sufficient to put everything right again. Nevertheless, the descendants of the first man were condemned to live outside the garden, but their essential nature as it was before the sin was still intact. A major consequence of this, remarks Jean-Mohammed, is that Islam does not have the anguish to which Christians can be prone, on account of the re-education needed in their fallen and redeemed state.

Another consequence, says Jean-Mohammed, is that the Muslim is inclined to enjoy the things of this world and does not 'come out of his littleness'. This tendency is corrected, however, by many Muslims who have a profound spirituality – the 'great souls of Islam'. This state of affairs, says Jean-Mohammed, means that Muslims are set free from earthly realities, and are at the same time 'trapped' in them. This state of affairs is complicated by the fact that God does not at all resemble his creatures and cannot communicate with them to raise them up to himself.²³⁶

At the end of this section Jean-Mohammed states his conviction that Islam is in a state of ferment and awakening, and is being influenced profoundly by the critical spirit and realism of Europe and North America. Islam wishes to be 'purified' and 'deepened', he believes.²³⁷ It is good that we be made aware of this when we encounter profound differences, such as the attitude to this present world as described above.

3.13 In Charity

In what goes before in his book, Jean-Mohammed has shed a piercingly critical light on the religion of his former allegiance. From the perspective of his newly found Christian faith it appears

²³⁶ *L'Islam et Nous*, p. 62/3.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 64/5.

to him, by comparison, quite deficient. He now wants to conclude on a more positive note, and hence the different emphasis in this final section. The description of Islam which he has given, he says, 'must not paralyse the charity of our faith, as we contemplate an "apocalyptic" vision of the future. We would do the Muslim an injustice if we saw him only under the aspect of a "warrior of Allah" animated no doubt by an ardent, albeit simplistic, faith, but at the same time filled with an appetite for domination and the booty of war, and drawn by the bait of a paradise of sensuous delights. This would be to seriously underestimate the nobility of character and chivalry that this idea of "Holy war", properly understood, can develop in Muslims.'²³⁸

Perhaps surprisingly, in the light of what he has said above about the warlike character of Muslims, Jean-Mohammed now says: 'We must have compassion on the "solitude" in which Islam tends to enfold the human person, and on the "littleness" in which it would leave him.'²³⁹ This he believes, is the 'fatal ransom', the price he must pay for the image he has of God.²⁴⁰ And 'instead of pushing him to harden his attitude, and continue in his neglect of the germs of the authentic religious riches which are enfolded within a rigid crust of official legalism, we must value all his real, healthy and constructive aspirations: aspirations for a more profound spiritual life, a sense of a less simplistic unity, and to a life of love in communion with others.'²⁴¹

He now exhorts Christians to preach by example rather than words. For 'the unity of Christians (which he is well aware does not exist juridically, and is frequently absent on a personal level) is the condition of authentic faith'.²⁴² It is not crystal clear what he means here but in quoting in the next sentence, '*sint unum ut credat mundus*',²⁴³ he is recalling for his readers the 'Last Discourse' of Jesus before his death, which includes his prayer for the unity of his disciples: 'May they all be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me.'(Jn.17:21) This unity of Christians 'is rooted in the

²³⁸ *L'Islam et Nous* p. 66.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 66/7.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²⁴³ 'May they be one that the world may believe'.

living Transcendence of God One and Three become, graciously, 'near and desirable and delectable'.²⁴⁴ Jean-Mohammed goes on to speak of the strength that comes from the Spirit of Christ, who is in the Church; it (this strength of the Spirit) will work in us and through us, and will lead all humanity to God.²⁴⁵

Finally he strikes a very realistic note as he refers to the situation we confront here and now: 'Without believing we have a monopoly of authentic charity, we must resolutely – and probably for a long time to come – never recoil from the heroic effort required to practice it for two, that is, ourselves and all those who are ignorant of it, misunderstand it, falsify or abuse it... because this task has been confided to us.'²⁴⁶ This fundamental underpinning of charity is necessary in all interreligious relations, for the task ahead is still very great. In confirmation of this, a present day theologian, Christian Troll, writing some seventy years after Jean-Mohammed, has said:

The considerable differences in Christian and Muslim outlook and practice in no way are to be denied or disfigured. Christians (as well as Muslims) in any given situation, and especially in situations of temptation, will be tempted in two ways: either to deny reality and its frequently complex and harsh face, painting a rosy picture, or to give in to the temptation of exaggerating, generalising, employing inflationary, popular terms... Courage and intelligence are needed in the effort of identifying the concrete problems, analysing them and thus preparing lasting solutions.²⁴⁷

And finally Maurice Borrmans, (who knew Jean-Mohammed personally and understood his thought) says in *Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims*, prepared for the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue:

Nothing would be more detrimental to true dialogue than a false effort at accommodation whereby Christians would seek to make their faith acceptable to Muslims. Dialogue would lose its meaning if Christian participants reduced their faith to generalities and toned down the doctrines which diverge from the statements in the Qur'an.²⁴⁸

In his short biography, *Témoignage d'un Tard-Venu à l'Eglise*, before he begins speaking about himself, Jean-Mohammed quotes a Moroccan proverb that he says is very dear to him: 'The

²⁴⁴ *L'Islam et Nous*, p. 67.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁴⁷ See *Christian Spirituality and Islam*, by Christian Troll SJ, in *The Bloomsbury Guide to Christian Spirituality*, Bloomsbury, London, 2012, p. 265.

²⁴⁸ *Guidelines, op.cit.* (Paulist Press, New York, 1981), p. 38.

words of a friend (because of their frankness and sincerity) may provoke me to tears, whilst those of an enemy may flatter and make me cheerful.²⁴⁹ He then says, 'I want to say what I believe to be true; even if it is hard: or rather because it is hard, and that is the greatest proof of my love for those whom I address.'²⁵⁰ In the context of what he has said about Islam in *L'islam et Nous*, these words are highly relevant.

4. Aspects Intérieurs de L'Islam

4.1 Introduction

The above is the title of a second book which Jean-Mohammed wrote as he tried to explain Islam, as he had experienced and understood it, to non-Muslims, Christians in particular. It was not written originally as a sequence to *L'islam et Nous*, and therefore will be used selectively as there is inevitably some repetition, but whatever sheds more light on what has already been said will be made use of. The book consists of a collection of articles written by the author between 1939 and 1947, and is undoubtedly a very valuable contribution towards our further understanding of Islam 'from the inside'.

The author states that his purpose is to 'help reflection'²⁵¹, but there is undoubtedly an underlying missionary intention, which is more or less admitted by the fact that the book is published by the series *La Sphere et La Croix*.²⁵² However Jean-Mohammed is keen to make the point that what he says is 'not propaganda, nor a methodology for the apostolate.'²⁵³ What he does wish is to 'stimulate a sense of responsibility in Christians with regard to the message and religious realities which have been entrusted to them'.²⁵⁴ Arguably then, it is a missionary text for Christians, but the author seems to have no doubt that Muslims will read it. Already they would seem to have read his manuscript, and raised the question in a friendly manner as to whether it is 'truly scientific'.

²⁴⁹ *Témoin.op.cit.* p. 18.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ *Aspects intérieurs de l'Islam*, p. 7. (Henceforth *Aspects*)

²⁵² *The Sphere and the Cross*. This is a series of publications promoted as 'a collection devoted to missionary problems'.

²⁵³ *Aspects* p. 10.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Thus he goes on to assert strongly his goal of achieving 'absolute objectivity', and he challenges anyone to whom he gives a contrary impression, on any point, to show him where he is wrong.²⁵⁵ He states clearly that 'he does not wish to impose his own opinions, but provide material on which others are free to make their own judgements, and he wishes, if he can, to enable his readers to make contact (with Islam) from within, and take their part in the ongoing work of knowledge and love, which can only be accomplished if we do it together.'²⁵⁶ His stated method to obtain the objectivity he desires is to quote at length from Islamic texts and let them 'speak for themselves'.²⁵⁷ What Jean-Mohammed is *not* attempting is a 'systematic comparison between Islam and Christianity'. However, he 'believes he knows well both religions from within',²⁵⁸ and therefore can speak with some authority. Towards the end of his lengthy explanatory introduction, he does speak of his mission, (aimed at Christians rather than Muslims), but he nevertheless insists that his work is truly 'scientific', even though this aspect of it 'has been questioned in a friendly way by Muslims'.²⁵⁹ 'And why should it not be scientific?' he asks, because the documents he presents are exact and he wishes to be told if he is not interpreting them with objectivity.²⁶⁰ What would not be scientific, he says, 'would be to declare *a priori* an intention to speak well of Christianity and use lyrical language to express its thought.'²⁶¹ This he is very capable of doing, and it inevitably shows itself sometimes.

I would argue, however, that he is not being as objective as he claims, and that on two grounds. The first is that he does not quote texts as abundantly as he gives the impression that he will, and secondly, Christianity now defines who he is to such a degree that he cannot see Islam in quite the same way that he saw it before his conversion, as his new faith is bound to colour in some way, perhaps unconsciously, what he says, and therefore make it less objective. He admits, for instance, in his first letter to Mulla-Zadé who helped him through the conversion process, that he

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

used to think that 'no Muslim, whatever his persuasion, could have any reason to change his religion', but now, he had 'lost all his Muslim convictions to give all his sympathy to the Catholic cause'.²⁶² And yet, Islam was still very much part of him, his matrix, and loved by him. Can we then, under these circumstances, learn anything about Islam from him? The answer would seem to be both yes and no. Obviously a non-Muslim will not see Islam exactly as a practicing Muslim would see it, for the reasons stated. Undoubtedly Jean-Mohammed now sees the relationship of Islam to Christianity very differently; it is not, for instance, abrogated, but on the contrary he finds his Islam is 'fulfilled' by his Christianity.²⁶³ However he still loved Islam which was so much part of his beloved homeland, and moreover was very knowledgeable about it in many of its aspects. Therefore he surely can be relied upon to teach us something of what it is like from within, with perhaps the added advantage that he is able to compare it with Christianity, which he also knows from within. Although what he says about Christianity is very understated, I would argue that in fact he tells us more about it than about Islam, if we really reflect on what he says. This is perhaps because against an Islamic 'backdrop' his few references to Christianity stand out all the more clearly. These will be highlighted as we proceed through this work, as well as anything he says about Islam that will deepen or extend what we have already learned from *L'Islam et Nous*.

4.2 The Qur'an and Muslim thought

Inevitably the first chapter is devoted to the Qur'an, since 'its role in the understanding of history, of Muslim thought in general, and its place in the life of believers, cannot be exaggerated.'²⁶⁴ It is the Book that has 'formed the Muslim mind', and offers him everything 'so that nothing can trouble him'.²⁶⁵ It is possible to discern here some indication of how difficult it must have been for Jean-Mohammed to let go of this certainty when he embraced Christianity, where there is no equivalent. There all is based on faith, which is the 'substance of things not seen' (Heb. Ch.11.1).

²⁶² *Mulla-Zadé, op,cit.*, letter dated 1st October, 1927, p. 15.

²⁶³ See *Témoign* p44. 'Faithful to his native Morocco, he was well aware of having 'accomplished' his 'islam' in becoming a Christian, a priest, and a Franciscan'.

²⁶⁴ *Aspects* p. 15.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

Scripture, dogma, liturgy, and the life of the Church support faith, but each person individually must commit him or herself to the living God, not the words of a book, and grow throughout life in response to that relationship.

In this chapter it is clear that Jean-Mohammed does not follow through his proposed intention, to use Islamic texts to demonstrate his objectivity. The Qur'an is not quoted at all, though he does give a breakdown of its contents in a lengthy footnote, as well as providing many other learned references in other footnotes, but most of these would be obscure for the general reader, at least in our day, and outside France.²⁶⁶

4.2.1 Is development of doctrine possible?

In the main text Jean-Mohammed now draws our attention to problems relating to revelation, that is, the profound difference between the Islamic and Christian Scriptures, especially the way we perceive development of doctrine and scriptural inspiration. 'Islam' he says, does not leave any room for an idea similar to that of "development" as found in Catholicism, for instance.

In the light of these remarks some comment on this concept of development of doctrine in Catholicism is in order. The Church from earliest times has taken very seriously its responsibility to 'guard the deposit of the faith' and transmit it faithfully – which includes development of doctrine and some adaptation to different times and places. John Henry Newman, after his conversion to Catholicism, believed it was an 'antecedent probability' that Jesus would have made provision for this when he founded the Church on Peter and the first apostles. This is an underlying principle which runs through his major work, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*.²⁶⁷ It is a principle with which he argues (what has always been implicit), that doctrine develops, as expressed in a series of Ecumenical Councils, and likewise Scripture itself 'develops' to address issues which did not exist at the time they were written, or towards which attitudes have changed, e.g. slavery, or

²⁶⁶ See for instance note 17, *Aspects* p. 204. The densely packed notes, in small print, extend from pp. 202-235.

²⁶⁷ *Newman: An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, the edition of 1845, edited with an introduction by J.M. Cameron, pub. Penguin Classics 1973.

warfare.²⁶⁸ This is a very complex area which is outside the scope of the thesis, but it is dealt with in depth by Francis A. Sullivan in his book *Magisterium*.²⁶⁹

By comparison, in Islam, says Jean-Mohammed, '[t]he revealed deposit (of faith) cannot be received in the way the earth receives an acorn which gives birth to a huge oak tree.'²⁷⁰ He realises that this comparison does not fit exactly but, he continues, 'it enables us to see that our perspective is limited... the human spirit always strives to know more of the "inexhaustible riches" of this revealed deposit.'²⁷¹ He then goes on to say what this means in practice in Christianity: it is 'the progressive development of a message relative to the Person of Christ, Man-God, the centre of (the Christian) religion... according to the action of the Spirit of God in the Church.'²⁷² In the Qur'an, by contrast, there is 'a complete divine doctrine, and legislation', and then there is in addition 'the teaching and practice of the Prophet, considered to be infallible.'²⁷³ This is despite the fact that there is evolution within the Qur'an itself. The Prophet's mission extended over twenty years, and there is evidence within the Qur'an that his teaching developed over that period.²⁷⁴ But 'official Islam' continues Jean-Mohammed, 'will not admit any possibility of change within its doctrine and prescriptions.'²⁷⁵ This attitude must be insisted upon 'whatever the illusions, deviations, insufficiencies, into which it causes later authors to fall.'²⁷⁶ He admits that 'modern' historians are preoccupied with 'sources', but this is not approved of in general.²⁷⁷ Christianity too has had this preoccupation, though perhaps to a lesser degree. It is only in the last century that biblical

²⁶⁸ See *ibid.*, especially Ch.2. *On the Development of Christian Ideas, Antecedently Considered*, pp. 148-78.

²⁶⁹ Francis A. Sullivan SJ, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church*, New York, Paulist Press, 1983

²⁷⁰ *Aspects* p. 20.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

²⁷² *Ibid.*

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 20-21.

²⁷⁴ See John Burton, *Abrogation*, EQ Vol.1, pp. 11-19.

²⁷⁵ *Aspects* p. 21.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.* This matter of sources is very important for dialogue. A non-Muslim cannot question anything about Islam so long as revelation is believed to be the literal word of God. It blocks dialogue at its source. Jean-Mohammed was writing in the 1940's. Since then, progress has been made, at least among scholars. As evidence see the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, which has many such articles by Muslim, as well as Christian and Jewish scholars working together, though it must be admitted it is the Christians who predominate (in fact we are not told which religion the authors belong to; it has to be deduced from their names and the countries/universities to which they belong).

scholarship has addressed these difficulties, but now the historical/critical method is taken for granted, and there is an abundant literature, easily accessible, of all areas of biblical research. Concerning sources for the Qur'an, it appears to an outsider that it contains elements of Judaism and Christianity, Arab traditions purified of paganism, also elements of neo-Platonism, parsi, and Gnosticism. 'But', we are informed, 'nothing is more wounding [than this idea of borrowing] to Muslim authors... no element can be considered as coming from a human source, even when they seem to be clearly borrowed from religious antecedents.'²⁷⁸ This shows how very differently Islam and Christianity understand scriptural inspiration. Jean-Mohammed shows his firm grasp of this when he says that 'for Christians, revelation and inspiration must not be confused. Revelation is a communication... by God, to a man, of a message, of a mission, not necessarily a text dictated word for word [as in Islam]. The man entrusted with this mission accomplishes it in his own way, according to his own temperament, his formation, his style, his personal talents, and dependent on his own milieu, the genius of his people, according to the mode of expression of his contemporaries... only – and this is inspiration – so that he does not err, he is given the special assistance of the Spirit of God. His message and writings are still called the word of God, because the content comes from God and is guaranteed by God, but the text is not dictated, as if all he had to do was transcribe it.'²⁷⁹ The only way the Islamic model of revelation/inspiration can be upheld is by claiming that the Jewish/Christian scriptures have been altered. As this is a serious issue between the two faiths, it will be developed in more depth below. It was a matter of primary concern to Jean-Mohammed, demonstrated by the fact that it was the first issue he addressed in his conversion process.²⁸⁰

4.2.2 Falsification (*tahrif*) of the Scriptures

One of the major difficulties in the discourse around our respective Scriptures is the fact that the Qur'an specifically states in several places that Scriptures other than the Qur'an have been

²⁷⁸ *Aspects* p. 31.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.* p. 19.

²⁸⁰ See Ch.5 of thesis, section 4.1.2.

altered in some way (e.g.Q2:75). This so-called 'falsification' (corruption) of the Scriptures may seem a minor problem from the Christian perspective, as there has never been any suggestion, apart from our relationship with Islam, that the Scriptures may have been deliberately falsified. As Chawcat Moucarry states:

The material evidence for the corruption of the Scriptures lies with the manuscripts. The study of these manuscripts confirms the integrity of the Bible. Far from being a handicap the very existence of many manuscripts has enabled scholars to establish that the text of the Bible has been amazingly well transmitted.²⁸¹

The question from a Christian perspective is for what purpose should whole books such as the prophecies of Jeremiah and Isaiah, which are absent from the Qur'an, be invented? Similarly, the four Gospels are not considered from the Islamic perspective to be the 'genuine' *Injil* (Gospel) given by God to Jesus (isa), as the Torah was given to Moses, and the Qur'an to Muhammad.²⁸² The Qur'an says twice that God brought Jesus (isa) the Gospel (Q5:46, 57:27), but the 'Gospel', in the Christian view, is 'the proclamation in the human community of the "good news" of the salvation of human beings that God has accomplished in Christ.'²⁸³ It is an oral tradition, not a written book. The four Gospels according to Matthews, Mark, Luke and John, were originally written in Greek, and bear witness to the life, words, and teachings of Jesus. The Qur'an, however, continues Sidney Griffith, always uses the word *Injil* in the singular: the Qur'an demonstrates 'no awareness of multiple gospels', but rather:

The conceptual differences between the Christian and Islamic views of the Gospel soon gave rise among Muslim commentators to the charge that Christians have 'distorted' (al-tahrif) the original Gospel of which the Qur'an speaks, in the way that the Qur'an suggests that the Jews distorted the Torah (Q4:46, 5:13).²⁸⁴

This issue has been a major cause of Christian/Muslim polemic since the beginning of the relationship, and it is both painful and sensitive for Muslims as well as Christians, as it challenges the sources of faith.

The Qur'an also says what form this falsification has taken; for instance, changing one word

²⁸¹ Chawcat Moucarry, *Faith to Faith: Christianity & Islam in Dialogue*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester 2001, p. 73

²⁸² See Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret: Interpreting the Christian Scriptures* pp. 247-258, esp. p. 248.

²⁸³ Sidney H Griffith, *Gospel*, in *EQ* 2, p. 342/3, here at p. 342.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

for another, hiding words or passages, or just forgetting them.²⁸⁵ It is perhaps not surprising that even for Muslims themselves the phenomenon causes problems. They ask, for instance; ‘What is its extent? Does it concern just some words or passages, or whole books? How can the real Torah ever be recovered? And finally who is responsible for this deliberate or unconscious negligence?’²⁸⁶ The Catholic theologian Robert Caspar M.Afr., and Chawcat Moucarray have both addressed this issue in depth.²⁸⁷ Both have used extensively the multi-volume qur’anic commentary of Fahr al-din al-Razi, (606/1209) ‘one of the principle philosophers, theologians, and above all a Muslim exegete [of Scripture]’.²⁸⁸ There are many theories explored as to how, or why, this falsification happened, but no examples, ‘for the Qur’an’, says Razi, ‘does not indicate precisely what had been corrupted.’²⁸⁹ Razi gives one concrete example only, which concerns the law of stoning for adultery (Deuteronomy 2:21f). He says:

The commentators of the Qur’an tell how a man and woman of rank committed adultery. because of their rank. They sent a delegation to the Prophet to ask him for his judgement...on this subject Gabriel revealed that they should be stoned. The envoys refused to accept this judgement.²⁹⁰

It may be noted at this point that Jesus also refused to condone this punishment when the Jews of his time presented him with a woman who had committed adultery (Jn.Ch.8:1-11), and also carried on a long conversation with a Samaritan woman who was in an adulterous relationship (Jn.Ch.4).

Moucarray devotes a chapter to asking why the Scriptures might have been falsified. ‘Would it make sense’, he asks, for any religious community to falsify what they hold most dearly?’²⁹¹ And in a more general way:

Certainly God’s revelation in Christianity is different from what Muslims expect it to be, but who are we to challenge God on the way he decides to reveal his word? Who are we to think that it is not fitting for the Scriptures to have been written in a way different from the

²⁸⁵ See *Textes de la Tradition Musulmane concernant le Tahrif (Falsification) des Ecritures: textes choisis et traduits par Jean-Marie Gaudeul et Robert Caspar, avec presentation, commentaire et notes par Robert Caspar, in Islamochristiana 6, 1980, pp. 61-104, here at p. 64.*

²⁸⁶ *Ibid., Islamochristiana 6.*

²⁸⁷ Caspar, *Islamochristiana* pp. 61-104, and Moucarray *op.cit.* in four chapters, pp. 44-79.

²⁸⁸ Caspar, *op.cit.* p. 65

²⁸⁹ Moucarray, p. 48

²⁹⁰ Caspar *op.cit.* p. 70

²⁹¹ Moucarray, p. 75

Qur'an? Muslims and Christians need to acknowledge that God is free to reveal his word as he pleases. As a result, Muslims ought not to read the Scriptures with an Islamic perspective, nor should Christians read the Qur'an with a Christian one.²⁹²

It might help to understand this strongly held view among Muslims that the Jewish and Christian Scriptures have been altered, if we bear in mind that there is a considerable history of this phenomenon between Sunni and Shi'i Islam. As is well known, the Shi'is differ from the Sunni majority of Islam concerning the legitimacy of political and spiritual succession to Muhammad. Here is not the place to discuss this matter in detail, except to say that Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet, and then the divinely appointed imams, should rule the community, whereas the Sunni appoint their leaders through election.²⁹³ The Shi'a in general believe that references to the Shi'a have been deleted from the Qur'an to legitimise the Sunni position, and this has been the cause of much tension between the two branches of Islam.

Shomali, however, in this small work, tends to minimise this issue, no doubt because he declares himself to be 'wholeheartedly committed to Islamic unity' and therefore emphasises that 'a careful study of all major Islamic schools shows that what they [Sunni and Shi'i] have in common is much more than what they differ about.'²⁹⁴ He notes, moreover, that 'The Glorious Qur'an itself explicitly says that God Himself preserves the Qur'an from any alteration and distortion: *Surely we have revealed the Reminder and We will most surely be its preserver.* (15.9).'²⁹⁵ However, he declares in a footnote that:

The charge with belief in alteration is limited to deletion of some alleged verses, otherwise neither the Shi'a nor the Sunni Muslims have ever been charged with belief in additions to the Qur'an. Therefore one can argue from the Qur'anic verses for refutation of the idea of alteration.²⁹⁶

This view, however, is disputed by Meir M. Bar Asher of the Hebrew University, who declares that 'the claim that the Qur'an had been falsified is one of the principal arguments to which early Shi'i

²⁹² *Ibid.* p. 77.

²⁹³ For a succinct summary of this issue see Mohammad Ali Shomali, *Discovering Shi'i Islam*, Centre for Cultural and Ethical Studies, distributed by Islamic Centre of England, London, 6th edition, 2010. I am grateful to the author for the gift of this book.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 9.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 27.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 27, footnote 1.

tradition resorted to explain the absence of any explicit reference to the Shi'a in the Qur'an.²⁹⁷ According to Bar Asher the Shi'i dispute the validity of the Uthmanic codex, the *textus receptus*. They cast doubt on the quality of its editing, alleging 'political tendentiousness' on the part of the editors, that is, the first three caliphs, especially Uthman. They are accused of falsification by omission of some phrases and addition of others.²⁹⁸ This is not the only complaint, however. Two additional arguments are that 'the Qur'an contains hidden meanings that the exegete should decipher' and that 'the Qur'an teaches principles while tradition expounds their details.' It is often a question of 'reading between the lines'.²⁹⁹

Throughout history many Shi'i communities have flourished under Sunni rule. They have survived by using techniques such as *taquiyya* 'precautionary dissimulation'.³⁰⁰ This is obviously a very sensitive point of dispute between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, as it is between Islam in general and the Jewish/Christian Scriptures, but Bar-Asher claims that 'the opinion that the Qur'an was falsified has been perpetuated throughout the history of Shi'ism and persists to this day.'³⁰¹

4.2.3 The Promise of the Paraclete

There is one further, well-known example of alleged falsification, which this time presupposes the Christian alteration of the New Testament, of a verse which Muslims in general believe is a prophecy of the coming of Muhammad. This is what Christians have always believed to be a prophecy of the coming of the Paraclete (the Holy Spirit) in John's Gospel.³⁰² According to Christian tradition this prophecy was fulfilled very quickly by the sending of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.³⁰³ Without knowledge of Arabic, it is difficult for a Christian to understand how a Muslim can believe this verse to be a prophecy of the coming of Muhammad, so we quote Hassan

²⁹⁷ Meir M. Bar-Asher, *Shi'ism and the Qur'an*, EQ Vol.4, pp. 593-603, here at p. 593.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 595.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.* p. 597.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.* p. 595.

³⁰² Jn.14:16. According to the NJB footnote, the original, *parakletos*, has various meanings, these being 'advocate', 'counsellor', 'protector', 'support'. See *The New Jerusalem Bible*, (Gen. Editor Henry Wansbrough), Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1985, p. 1777.

³⁰³ See *Acts of the Apostles* Ch2:1-4, *ibid.* p1800 (NJB) with explanatory footnotes.

Dehqani-Tafti who, having been a Muslim, is able to explain:

In its original Greek form this verse uses the word 'paraklitos', which means advocate or comforter. There is another term in Greek, 'periklitos', which is spelt slightly differently and means 'one who is worthy of praise' ('hamd'). Since 'hamd' is the root from which are derived the three names Muhammad, Ahmad and Mahmud, all meaning 'worthy of praise', Muslims argue that the word 'periklitos' must have been used in the original version of John's gospel and was replaced by Christians with the word 'paraklitos'. In this way the meaning 'worthy of praise' was changed to 'advocate'.³⁰⁴

Hassan continues, 'This claim has no historical basis since the old texts of the Gospel of John existed a few centuries before Islam and demonstrate that no distortion took place'.³⁰⁵ Hassan's view accords with what Kenneth Cragg has said even more forcefully, without hiding the pain involved, but nevertheless with a touch of wry humour: 'This charge and the Muslim alteration have no textual basis. Nor does the sense of the passage bear the Muslim rendering. It is well to remember that the interpretation arises, in the end, not from exegesis but from presupposition. However painful the necessity, the Christian must cheerfully shoulder the task of distinguishing clearly between Muhammad and the Holy Spirit, and of appreciating how it comes about that the Muslim can be so confidently confused on this point.'³⁰⁶

The Christian cannot really do more than what Cragg recommends here. However, it does raise the question, not to be addressed here, as to what extent an 'outsider' can really understand the Scriptures of another faith, without sharing the faith commitment of that religion. How can a Christian be sympathetic towards this Muslim conviction on 'falsification' without entering into polemics? It would seem to be impossible. However, on a more hopeful note, Christian Troll informs us that there are 'some Muslim scholars, past and present, who have accepted the text of the Bible as it stands today... but add that the Christian interpretation need not exclude other (e.g. Muslim) interpretations of them'.³⁰⁷ This could be a promising development.

We now return to *Aspects Intérieurs de L'Islam*. Jean-Mohammed now discusses two further

³⁰⁴ *Chimes of Church Bells, op.cit*, p. 10.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁶ *The Call of the Minaret*, p. 257.

³⁰⁷ *Muslims Ask, Christians Answer*, New York, New City Press, 2012, p. 4. He gives several examples in a footnote, p. 133.

points concerning the Qur'an, but as the first point concerns the matter of predestination, nothing more will be said here as it has already been dealt with above under Fatalism, a similar concept.³⁰⁸

Nevertheless he makes a very critical statement about God who according to Islam 'guides along a good path, but also leads astray whoever he wills, and even seems to wish to fill hell according to his good pleasure without taking any account of the merits of men, while at the same time being 'the Merciful One' who wishes to pardon.'³⁰⁹

4.3 Mysticism

The second point in Jean-Mohammed's discussion concerns the mystical element of Islam, which we normally associate with Sufism. Although Sufism seems to have absorbed elements from external sources such as Christian monasticism, Indian methods of meditation, and neo-Platonism, 'all the essential principles', according to Jean-Mohammed, 'are Quranic'.³¹⁰ This is because 'it is the awakening of a knowledge previously superficial... which has long lain dormant. One who finds such riches in the text ... is not finding something invented and added on, but discovered and made explicit.'³¹¹ The way Jean-Mohammed speaks of this would indicate that he himself, without becoming formally a Sufi, found much spiritual sustenance in this way of reading the Qur'an.

In his conclusion to this section Jean-Mohammed laments the fact that the final years of the Prophet were taken up with much administration, which has resulted in the Qur'an being overloaded with minute legislation relating to domestic affairs such as the art of making war, the treatment of non-Muslims etc. He judges this to be a 'failure', because it is to the detriment of other aspects of the Qur'an which deal with the interior life.³¹² However, he claims that 'there is a new way of thinking in the twentieth century, whereby more attention is given to Muslim mysticism as an integral part of Islam itself, but it is too early to say whether this has borne fruit.'³¹³

³⁰⁸ See section 3.12.2 of this chapter.

³⁰⁹ *Aspects*, p' 31/2.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³¹² *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 36. Alexander Knysh of the University of Michigan, in his essay on *Sufism and the Qur'an*, says that 'for the first four centuries of Islamdom, Sufism was 'part and parcel of the spiritual, social and spiritual life',

4.4 Islam and history

4.4.1 The role of prophets

In this section Jean-Mohammed explores the Islamic view of history as seen through the Qur'an, which he sees as quite different from the way Christianity sees 'salvation history', based on the Bible. 'The Muslim soul', explains Jean-Mohammed, 'has been fashioned by the Qur'an', and this gives birth to an 'understanding of history which gives value judgements on all events they [Muslims] will meet.' It is an attitude that is 'more religious than "technical"; elaborate philosophical techniques are not needed, nor critical research, nor scientific methods of modern history.'³¹⁴ For Islam, 'the history of humanity is the history of men's religion, their dealings with their Creator, their fidelity or disobedience to his will, with consequences happy or otherwise.'³¹⁵

The 'past' in Islam is understood to be the whole of history which precedes the event of the Qur'an, and Islam is now situated between two 'summits' that give a framework to history. The first begins in eternity, with a word to creatures before their creation; a 'covenant' given while they were still in the loins of Adam, where it was stipulated that they should recognise Allah as their Lord. 'Am I not your Lord?' says the Creator, and they say, 'Yes, we bear witness to it'.³¹⁶ The second 'summit' is the end of time when God will judge mankind on this contract they made before their creation.³¹⁷ The creature has only one destiny: 'to recognise and proclaim the One Lord', for the Qur'an says, 'I created men (and jinns) for the sole purpose that they adore me.'³¹⁸ But unfortunately, Jean-Mohammed continues, 'a deplorable tendency drags them from their essential duty, and they associate with God other divinities, and idols.'³¹⁹ It is here that prophecy finds its true function – to recall people to their obligations towards the One God.

but 'with the advent of modernity in the thirteenth/nineteenth century Sufism was subject to strident criticism by Muslim modernists and reformers, and in the course of the fourteenth/twentieth century lost ground to competing ideologies, both religious and secular.' (*EQ* Vol.6, p. 137, pub. Leiden, 2006) Today it is still not mainstream

³¹⁴ *Aspects* p. 38.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 39.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.* See Q7/172.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

³¹⁸ Q51/56. See *Aspects* p. 40.

³¹⁹ *Aspects* p. 40.

It is in this context that God periodically sends prophets, in order to 'warn' people and remind them of their primordial promise to recognise the one God. These prophets always bear the same message whatever the time or place. Because their message is not always welcome, they have been 'misunderstood, scorned, ill-treated and sometimes killed.'³²⁰ The God of Islam, says Jean-Mohammed, 'never pardons anyone who associates another with him, but anything else he pardons as he wishes.'³²¹ There will be a final reckoning at the end of time when 'all men will be solemnly judged in a universal gathering of people.'³²² Many prophets are mentioned by name, most of whom can be found in the Bible, but some not. 'More detail is given', says Jean-Mohammed, 'when the divine reproaches are addressed to people with a more privileged history, who despite this have not been less unfaithful.'³²³ Moreover, he continues, there was no 'chosen people' before the Muslim community to whom God confided a special mission for the whole world, and 'despite the accumulation of privileges and miracles that mark their history, the Jews were quick to murmur and inclined to infidelity... and thus they await eternal chastisement.'³²⁴ Christians fare no better, but it is Jesus (Isa) who is singled out for special attention. Jesus (Isa) was a very privileged individual, but he was treated badly by the Jews; he was their Messiah but they did not recognise him - 'they even seemed to put him to death, but God raised him to himself.'³²⁵ Finally the point is made that Jesus is a man like other men and a prophet like other prophets, although it is acknowledged that his role extends beyond the people to whom he was sent, and he will have a role to play at the end of time.³²⁶

The Prophet Muhammad, says Jean-Mohammed, is likewise a simple messenger no different

³²⁰ *Ibid.*

³²¹ Q4/51. See *Aspects* p41. Jean-Mohammed must have been aware here of the profound gulf that separates Islam and Christianity, where the purpose of creation (in Christianity) is that we should know and love God, be redeemed, forgiven, and lifted up from the depths of our profoundly ingrained sinful state, but he says nothing of it. However in the last chapter when he compares the Islamic and Christian communities, such issues as this will become more explicit.

³²² *Aspects* p. 41.

³²³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43. The issue of whether Jesus was crucified or not, a profoundly important one for Christians, will be dealt with in the next chapter.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*

from his predecessors, and in essentials his message is the same. However he is the last of the Messengers (Q33/40), and 'the canonical prescriptions of the Book are irrevocable to the end of time... He has no connection with Jews or Christians; his spiritual ancestor being Abraham who was neither Jew nor Christian.'³²⁷ He claims a heritage to which neither Jews nor Christians have been faithful, 'yet despite that they wish to be exclusive, to the detriment of Ishmael and his descendants.'³²⁸

4.4.2 Original Sin

In this context of the prophets the thorny question of original sin is addressed by Jean-Mohammed. This drama of the infidelity of humankind to God is woven into history and in the Islamic version, 'men are aided in their evildoing by an evil being, namely Satan, an angel created from light'.³²⁹ We are reminded of the famous passage in the Qur'an in which this angel is required to prostrate before Adam, who was only made of clay, but refuses (Q2/32-37). And then as described similarly in Genesis, Adam and his wife (not mentioned in the Qur'an by name) are put into a garden where, as also in Genesis, they are forbidden to touch a certain tree, but are tempted by Satan to do so, and as a consequence have to leave the garden.³³⁰ But there the similarity ends. Jean-Mohammed informs us that there have been many and varied commentaries on this text, but the one thing they have in common is 'a profound repugnance, in every case, to a doctrine of "original sin" and its consequences.'³³¹ However, he notes, there is a tradition going back to the Prophet himself which says that 'every son of Adam, when new-born, is touched (or 'pricked') by Satan, except the Son of Mary and his mother.' And a similar tradition says that 'Satan circulates around a man like his blood.'³³² The Prophet does not exclude himself from this general law, but 'he was purified as a young child, having conquered any satanic influence by converting his personal Satan (*chaytâne*) to Islam.' 'This', says Jean-Mohammed, is written without a shade of irony, but is a

³²⁷ *Ibid.*

³²⁸ *Ibid.*

³²⁹ *Ibid.*

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 44 In the Qur'anic text the sinful pair are pardoned, because 'He is He who pardons, and is good'.

³³¹ *Ibid.*

³³² *Ibid.*, p. 45.

serious expression of faith which recognises the action of Satan in the history of men, before as well as after Islam.³³³

Here it is appropriate to discuss further the question of original sin because of its fundamental importance in Christianity, being the basis for the need for redemption/salvation which Christians believe was delivered through Jesus Christ, yet not seen as necessary in Islam.

4.4.3 Original Sin: a Christian Perspective

The idea of redemption is not a central one in Islam, and 'few scholars have made any attempt to explain this most interesting feature.'³³⁴ Lazarus-Yafeh offers as a possible explanation for this: the fact that 'the community as such was a charismatic one', and 'doing nothing to forfeit one's membership' is sufficient for salvation.³³⁵ In a footnote she makes the comment that 'this is in distinct contrast to Judaism and of course Christianity.'³³⁶ She also believes that 'perhaps the striking success of early Islam' was a contributory factor to this attitude.³³⁷ In addition there is in Islam the concept of *fitra*, which is 'man's inborn quality to know God and worship him in the right way [which] made redemption somewhat unnecessary in Islam.'³³⁸ This is the reason, according to Lazarus-Hafeh, why 'Islamic polemicists during the Middle Ages attacked (very severely) the Christian notions of Original Sin and Redemption.'³³⁹

In Christianity it is 'original sin' that is perceived to be at the root of the need for redemption, (although it is not accepted as a precise doctrine in all denominations). It may be noted here that the 'Fall' and subsequent need for redemptions should not be understood as happening literally as recorded in Gen. Ch3. The story here recorded is a 'myth', which is not a work of fiction, but a story that tries to record a truth too deep to be expressed adequately in words. However it

³³³ *Ibid.*

³³⁴ Hava Lazarus-Yafeh Ch 4, *Is there a Concept of Redemption in Israel?* from *Some Religious Aspects of Islam*, Leiden, Brill. 1981, p. 48. The author was Jewish, a professor at the Hebrew University.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*

³³⁶ Footnote 3, *Ibid.* p. 46.

³³⁷ Footnote 2, *ibid.* p. 48.

³³⁸ *Ibid.* .

³³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 48. She refers to 'marginal Islamic phenomena' concerning the idea of a 'Mahdi', especially among the Shi'ites, but these ideas will not be developed here. (p. 49).

could be argued from observation that the 'sin' is very real in its effects, and the flawed nature of the human race as we perceive it today, with its capacity for depravity and evil in many forms (which is not to deny its capacity for good and even heroism), would seem to suggest that something, which cannot be specifically defined, went wrong when humankind was first created. From a scientific/anthropological perspective, however this is impossible to prove. There follows below a closer comparison of the texts from the Qur'an and the Bible which illustrates how differently the 'sin' is understood in Islam. However, it might be surmised that the biblical text was known to the 'author' of the Qur'an, who has nuanced it to frame the very different Islamic understanding of its meaning.

The Qur'anic and biblical accounts of how this 'sin' was committed are superficially very similar, differing mainly in their understanding of the degree of the severity of the offence against God. Despite this discrepancy, the 'punishment' is the same – expulsion from paradise. Rather than seeing this as a punishment, however, the Qur'an states that 'the Fall (Q 7:24) is not so much a consequence of sin as a result of God's promise, previous to sin, to establish Adam as his representative on earth (Q 2:30).³⁴⁰ In the biblical account of the Fall (Gen.Ch.3) Adam, who was created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) was put in the Garden of Eden with Eve, his wife. They had complete freedom except that they were forbidden to eat 'under pain of death' from a certain tree. But the devil, in the form of a snake, spoke to them and persuaded them that they would not die, but rather would achieve god-like status: 'Your eyes will be opened' he said, 'and you will be like gods, knowing good from evil.' (Gen.3:4-6). Eve succumbed to the temptation and persuaded Adam to do the same, and the consequences were catastrophic. Henceforth they would both experience death. In addition the woman would have pain in childbearing and be dominated by her husband (Ch.3:16), and the soil was cursed so that for the man it would be a struggle henceforth to grow crops in order to feed his dependents, until the day he died. 'For', said God, 'dust you are, and to

³⁴⁰ Michel Lagarde, 'Sin, Repentance and Forgiveness in the Qur'an and Tradition', *Encounter* no.107, July/August 1948, p. 6.

dust you shall return.’ (Ch.3:17-19)³⁴¹ It is to be noted that there is nothing about the angels who, by contrast, feature prominently in the Qur’anic account. Here God expresses his intention, prior to the ‘fall’, to have a vicegerent or ‘caliph’ on earth (Q2:38).³⁴² However the angels objected that humans would ‘foment corruption and shed blood’ (Q2:30). Man’s superiority and privilege is demonstrated by the fact that he can name the animals and the angels cannot (Q2:33).³⁴³ Next God required that the angels should prostrate before Adam. This episode is mentioned seven times in the Qur’an, suggesting it is of fundamental importance. It is used ‘to explain the devil’s fall from heaven’, and ‘to illustrate the high station of Adam’.³⁴⁴ They all did so except Iblis who became known as Satan, the tempter who ‘provokes humans to evil, whispering in their hearts, and even tampering with the messages revealed to the prophets.’³⁴⁵ Next, as in the Genesis account, the human couple are invited to inhabit the Garden and eat freely, except from a certain tree and likewise, at the instigation of Satan, they fail the test, and as in the Genesis account, had to leave the Garden and dwell on earth (Q2:38). But the ‘sin’ itself, if such it can be called, was forgiven. ‘The Christian doctrine of “original sin” is as foreign to the Qur’an as it is to the Jewish Bible.’³⁴⁶

4.4.4 The ‘sense of history’ in Islam and Christianity

In his conclusion to this present chapter entitled ‘Islam and History’, Jean-Mohammed begins by describing what Muslims are to expect in the future, which is summed up as victory for God and those who have been faithful to his Oneness. Their duty in the present time is to be the

³⁴¹ The Christian season of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, when all are solemnly anointed on the forehead with ashes in the form of a cross, while the words of that primeval curse are pronounced. Thus begins a season of penance leading up to the re-enactment of the death and resurrection of Jesus at Easter.

³⁴² In the biblical account God gives humans ‘sovereignty’ over creation (Gen.1:28).

³⁴³ In the biblical account (Gen.2:18-20) God brought all the animals and birds to the man and invited him to give them names.

³⁴⁴ See Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur’an and its Biblical Subtext*, Oxon, Routledge, 2010, pp. 39-53 *The Prostration of the Angels*, here at p. 39..

³⁴⁵ Droge, *op.cit.* note to Q2:36, with several supporting references. It is interesting that according to Ismail Al-Faruqi angels ‘have no freedom to violate the divine imperative’; humans are superior because they have the freedom to realise (or not) the moral law. (*Islam and other Faiths*, (Ch.1 *The Essence of Religious Experience in Islam* p13). However, this begs the question: how could they refuse or accept to prostrate before Adam if they were not free, intelligent, moral beings?

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Note on Q2:36.

‘sole authentic witnesses of the Oneness of God – the essential truth and touchstone of salvation’.³⁴⁷

Jean-Mohammed then explains that the Muslim does not look for a ‘sense of history’. He must simply ‘abandon himself to the All-Powerful. That is the meaning of the word ‘islam’.’³⁴⁸ The way one looks at history, he says, depends on one’s understanding of God; that of Islam is indeed ‘high and noble’,³⁴⁹ and although in Christianity it might appear less so, there is a different kind of transcendence. He describes it thus:

God is indeed All-Powerful, and Christians must never lose sight of his transcendence and the need to adore, but they know also that God invites them not only to affirm him in his Unity, but to open themselves to him, receive his Gift in their thought and their whole being; that is what Christian abandonment is about.³⁵⁰

The vision of the future in Christianity, according to Jean-Mohammed, consists in the gradual building up of the ‘whole Christ’, a spiritual reality which will include all people, and whose ultimate goal is the heavenly Jerusalem.³⁵¹

4.5 The East as it prays

There follow two long chapters, one on Egypt and one on the Salafiya movement, that finds its focal point in Egypt. They are very interesting, especially the latter, not least because Jean-Mohammed belonged to a similar movement in his youth and had much sympathy for its ideals.³⁵² His comments reveal great insight into the differences that separate Eastern (Muslim) and Western culture. These issues are important but not to be dealt with in depth here. Instead we pass on to the next chapter which is an account of the prayer of Islam, beginning with the liturgy of the *Hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca that all Muslims must make once in a lifetime, if possible, and which he himself made as a young boy of fourteen with his parents. In his opening sentence Jean-Mohammed

³⁴⁷ *Aspects* p. 48.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

³⁵² He was a disciple of Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905), who was a disciple of the Egyptian Jamâl al-din al Afghâni (1839-1898). The former became the ‘grand mufti’ of Egypt in 1899. He was also part of the movement begun by Muhammad Ibn’ ‘Abd al-Wahhâb (1703-1791), whose fundamentalist teaching became the official doctrine of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. See *Mulla-Zadé, op.cit.* p. 260.

says that 'one of the best ways of understanding men is to meditate on their formulae of prayer.'³⁵³

4.5.1 The Hajj

Jean-Mohammed describes the *Hajj*, and the accompanying prayers, in great detail, but the intention here is to give this information in skeleton form only, as for present purposes it is his own comments which follow that are more relevant. Before we begin, however, it must be acknowledged that in this chapter at least he keeps his promise to give the actual texts of the prayers.

He begins by describing the departure; the pilgrims must put themselves in the right disposition by repenting, paying debts, repairing any wrong, making sure family needs are provided for.³⁵⁴ On entering the sacred precincts around Mecca they begin with ablutions and donning a white garment which they must wear till the end of the pilgrimage. From then on they are 'consecrated' and must give up certain legitimate activities, for instance washing, conjugal acts, and hunting.³⁵⁵ The opening prayer is as follows: 'I come to you, Lord, from a far country, my conscience burdened with many sins, in the hope that you will receive me with favour and generosity, and that at the last day you will keep me from the devouring flames of hell.'³⁵⁶

There follow ritual perambulations around the black stone, the *Ka'ba*, in the middle of the Great Mosque. Next there is a commemoration of Hagar, who according to Muslim tradition was dismissed with her son Ishmael by Abraham and came to Mecca.³⁵⁷ Again there is the continually repeated affirmation; 'There is no God but Allah who is One. He has no Associates... He gives life and takes it away. He can do all...'³⁵⁸ There follows the 'station of Arafat', the most important of the pilgrimage. In this the pilgrims congregate on a hillside fifteen kilometres from Mecca where a preacher, mounted on a camel like the Prophet recites out loud long prayers that all repeat. At

³⁵³ *Aspects* p. 117.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

³⁵⁷ As recorded in the Book of Genesis Ch.21:8-21. There they finally made their home in the 'desert of Paran', and Ishmael's mother got him a wife from Egypt.

³⁵⁸ *Aspects* p. 123.

some point a ram is sacrificed by each pilgrim, in imitation of Abraham's sacrifice.³⁵⁹

Jean-Mohammed allows himself some comments from a Christian perspective at the end of this description, where it is possible to see that the often moving prayers of the *Hajj* are now for him, not enough. The prayers are 'very theological', he says, 'very specific to the Muslim soul'. The 'One God' is mentioned several times, a repeated refrain, but would not detract in any way from the Christian theology '*De Deo Uno*'.³⁶⁰ Nevertheless he finds that the prayers, although manifesting 'a humble and grave faith – not at all sad – one could even say they generate spiritual joy in more interior souls, but it is serenity and abandonment rather than jubilation.'³⁶¹ He compares the piety of the Old Testament which is 'animated, in varying degrees, despite humiliations and violence, with a strong accent of jubilation which bursts forth in enthusiastic song which associates with it the whole of creation – the sky and the earth, the stars and the waters, plants and animals, the zither and the sound of the harp – and the exultation of man in God, and the ardent hope of being exalted by God. And this is like the luminous dawn ... announcing Him who passed by way of the Cross to that Joy which he calls his followers to live here below'.³⁶²

4.5.2 Ritual Prayer

This section deals with the everyday ritual prayer of Muslims, as opposed to personal prayer which has no obligatory formulae. This prayer is very important for both men *and* women, claims Jean-Mohammed, despite widely held opinions to the contrary. Children accompany their parents from a very early age, and more seriously from 'the age of reason', about seven years.³⁶³ There are five of these prayers, to be said at dawn, midday, three pm, sunset, and when night has fallen. To be valid they must be accompanied by ablutions which ensure one is in a state of legal purity, which can be lost in several ways, not necessarily connected with sin, for instance, through deep sleep,

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 124. See also Genesis Ch.22. A long footnote (no.131, p219-20) explores the Islamic tradition of how Ishmael came to be substituted for Isaac, but in fact it does not have any profound theological implication, whichever son it was.

³⁶⁰ 'Of the One God', See *Aspects* p. 126.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*

³⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 127.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*

satisfying the smallest natural need, natural or accidental loss of blood. Any failure, even inadvertently, to perform these rites as they are prescribed, can render the prayer invalid.³⁶⁴ The ablutions are described by Jean-Mohammed in some detail, and he makes the point that sand can be used if no water is available.³⁶⁵ Before beginning these prayers, the Muslim must always ensure he is facing Mecca.³⁶⁶

4.5.3 The Call to prayer

The daily call to prayer from the minaret at the top of a mosque perhaps most characteristically represents Islam for the non-Muslim. The *muezzin*, the 'caller', we are informed, is not as important as the *imâm* who preaches. The latter must be a man of knowledge and piety; however, both are laymen since 'there is no place for the priesthood in Islam'. In fact, says Jean-Mohammed, such an idea is even 'repellent': Islam refuses to allow any kind of priesthood, and reproaches Christianity for being 'a religion of intermediaries'.³⁶⁷ Earlier he has quoted Taha Hussein who summarises the Islamic attitude to clergy: Islam rises above this idea which would put intermediaries between God and his creatures.³⁶⁸

Jean-Mohammed does not take issue with this position, and admits that the call to prayer holds a strong attraction and fascination for many Europeans, as it invites people to quit their temporal activities and turn all their attention to the 'All-Powerful'.³⁶⁹ However he would have been well aware that the mediation of the priesthood brought God closer to people and was no barrier between God and his creatures.

4.5.4 Deficiencies of ritual prayer

Before offering his concluding remarks on this section, Jean-Mohammed gives us some indication of the existence of prayer which is more personal, but on the whole he concludes that the

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.128.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

opportunities for such prayer are limited – unless of course one embraces Sufism.³⁷⁰ It is ritualism that dominates official Islam; ‘it has to satisfy every type of believer, both those who believe little and those with an ardent piety.’³⁷¹ But there exists beside this what he calls ‘the psalmody of the Qur’an’, by which he means a devotion to the Qur’an that is superior to ritualism.³⁷² There are also still extant the prayers of Muhammad which are particularly recommended, as well as those of other holy men ‘known for their fidelity to God’. These, he argues, help ‘fill a need that the ordinary mould of ritual piety leaves unsatisfied’.³⁷³ Nevertheless his final comments on prayer in Islam, including those of the *Hajj*, seems to indicate that despite possessing admirable qualities, it is lacking what he has found in Christianity, that is, a deep personal relationship with God. About Islam, he says that the formulae ‘reveal a sharp sense of the divine transcendence... the Oneness of God is tirelessly affirmed, as well as constant repetitions of expressions of adoration and praise.’³⁷⁴ Prayers of petition are less frequent; when they are made it is usually to ask that the believer’s faith ‘be preserved from doubt and all change’.³⁷⁵ He notes finally that the horizon of these prayers does not extend beyond the Muslim community, but rather, they ‘reinforce the sense of this particular community, separated from other communities by its faith free from alteration and compromise’, and ‘charged with the mission of witnessing to the Oneness of God, without Associates, before the world.’³⁷⁶ Jean-Mohammed has undoubtedly found in Islam a sense of union with God, but not in the official prayers which he considers tends to emphasise the sense of separation between God and mankind.³⁷⁷ Moreover, he adds, ‘the minute regulations about ritual do not have much practical effect on many believers’ and what is more, some ‘teachers’ have even indicated that ‘sanctity is already achieved through their accomplishment’, whereas ‘mystics know you also need renunciation

³⁷⁰ This is dealt with over several pages, especially the prayers of Hallaj which are highly personal, but this is to depart from mainstream Islam. See *Aspects* pp. 146-154.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 143.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

and sincerity of heart.³⁷⁸

4.6 Elements of religious formation in Islam: the *Qibla*

This rather lengthy chapter by Jean-Mohammed on Muslim spirituality in general has much repetition of what has been said before, for example in *L'Islam et Nous*, as dealt with in the first half of this chapter. On the whole it is to be noted that he sees much to be admired and his comments are usually positive. To avoid much repetition this present section is restricted to what he has to say about the *qibla*, because of its strong formative effect on Islam from its beginnings until today.

The *qibla* is the direction the Muslim must face when he says his ritual prayers. On his arrival in Medina in 622, when he was fifty three years old, the Prophet faced the same way as the Jews, towards Jerusalem, but the following year Muslims received the order, through the Qur'an, to turn towards Mecca.³⁷⁹ This was a profoundly significant act.³⁸⁰ In a footnote Jean-Mohammed explains that this was not done primarily for political reasons, but had a deep religious significance; it was 'connecting Islam to Abrahamic monotheism and the call from on high that the Prophet experienced.'³⁸¹ This change coincided with a change in the Prophet's attitude to the Jews; it was a sign of rupture, and henceforth the Jews were constrained to submit to Islam or disappear. At this time religious polemic became more violent, and 'over the heads of Jews and Christians, the Qur'an declared itself to be going back to Abraham.'³⁸² As Jean-Mohammed explains, the Arabs were the descendants of Abraham through Hagar and Ishmael, and 'the temple of Mecca was declared to be Abrahamic and Islam was to establish the authentic religion, purified of Arab idolatry and Judeo-Christian alterations.'³⁸³ Accordingly, he continues, this has had two effects; to reinforce a feeling of separation from non-Muslims, and to unite Muslims across the boundaries of political dissensions

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

³⁸⁰ For a full treatment of all the implications see Richard Kimber, *Qibla*, EQ Vol 4, pp. 325-329.

³⁸¹ *Aspects* p. 226, footnote 167.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 158 This has profound implications for the Islamic claim to 'abrogate' Judaism and Christianity.

See Kimber, *op.cit*, p. 325.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*

and doctrinal differences.³⁸⁴ It is a 'powerful tool of religious formation', and is even seen as 'a condition of the validity of ritual prayer.'³⁸⁵ In these observations Jean-Mohammed is saying, as is well known, that bodily gestures in prayer affect one's mind and spirit, and in that sense over time are very formative of one's attitude to God, and the community to which one belongs, though in Christianity it certainly would not be claimed that the position or direction of prayer was a condition of its validity.

The importance of the *qibla*, the direction of prayer in Islam, cannot be overestimated. It is a very striking feature of Islam that all pray, from wherever they are, in the direction of Mecca, even resorting to a compass if necessary. It is in fact comparable to the importance of the sign of the cross that Christians make before and after prayer, a sign which signifies the intention to place oneself in the presence of God to address him, as does the *qibla* in Islam, but it is saying, in sign language, that the presence of God is within. The sign is made on one's own body and there is no need to turn in any particular direction. It recalls the crucifixion and its central importance in Christianity, and by association the mystery of redemption – denied by Islam, that it represents. This 'redemption' is within, and there is no need to turn to Jerusalem where it all happened. Why, then, is it so important that Muslims must always turn to Mecca when they pray?

From its beginnings Islam has had difficulty knowing how to relate to previous religions, especially Judaism and Christianity. Moses and Jesus figure prominently in Muslim traditions as great prophets who brought to their communities the *Tawrat* and the *Injil*.³⁸⁶ Various opinions prevailed, but because of the conviction that the Jewish and Christian Scriptures had been corrupted, it was generally believed that nothing in these Scriptures could be accepted unless it was verified by a quote in the Qur'an or the hadith. Therefore Islam believed that these Scriptures no longer represented the divine will and so all humanity, inclusive of Jews and Christians, was called upon to embrace Islam. There were debates arguing in the opposite direction – that these Scriptures

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

³⁸⁶ Yohanan Friedman, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 19.

were still valid, for instance with the support of Q5.48: 'We have sent down the Book to you with the truth revealed in previous Scriptures and determining what is true therein.'³⁸⁷ It was recognised that these Scriptures did contain some truth, but because whatever was true was repeated in the Qur'an, Muslims were under no obligation to follow their prescriptions. Otherwise there would be no need for a new prophet. It is by this principle that Islam argues that it has abrogated both Judaism and Christianity.³⁸⁸

However, in practice, it proved necessary to distinguish between the early days of Islam, when the Muslims were weak, and the time that followed their later strikingly successful military campaigns. In the early days Muhammad desired to follow the People of the Book in matters concerning which he did not receive any specific commands, but later, '[w]hen Islam became strong by means of *jihad* and humiliation was inflicted on the People of the Book – God put an end to this emulation and ordered the Prophet to differ from the Jews.'³⁸⁹ The change of direction of the *qibla* from Jerusalem to Mecca was part of this process. After the *hijra*, in the early days of the Muslim community in Medina, the incoming population was relatively weak because of the large numbers of Jews (and some Christians) that lived there already. Therefore the Prophet initially sought accommodation with the non-Muslim segment of the population. These were all People of the Book, and monotheistic, so it might have been a straightforward matter.³⁹⁰ Muhammad made approaches to them promising salvation in the hereafter; they only had to believe in God, the Last Day, and do good works – there would be no need to convert to Islam. Moreover the Prophet generously showed himself disposed to adopt certain rituals associated with the Jewish tradition. Concerning the direction of the *qibla*, formerly, in Mecca, there had been three traditions. To begin with the Prophet prayed in the direction of the Ka'ba; another tradition records that he prayed in the direction of Jerusalem; yet another that he prayed in the direction of Jerusalem while ensuring that

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22/23.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26. This is according to traditions recorded by Bukhari and Muslim.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29/30. Friedman compares this issue of the *qibla* to that of the 'satanic verses' which seemed to be revealed to Muhammad when he was trying to conciliate his own tribe earlier in Mecca. See *Ibid.* p. 28/29.

the Ka'ba was on a straight line between himself and Jerusalem.³⁹¹

According to Friedman there is a unanimous tradition that the Prophet prayed in Medina in the direction of Jerusalem for the first sixteen, seventeen, or eighteen months, but at the end of this time Q2.144 was revealed: 'Turn your face towards the Holy Mosque; and wherever you may be, turn your face towards it.'³⁹² It would seem that the Jews were happy when the Prophet prayed in the direction of Jerusalem ; there are even faint echoes of joint prayers of Muslims and Jews, but unfortunately the Jews wrongly interpreted this gesture as a Muslim declaration of intent to embrace the Jewish religion in its entirety. Therefore the *qibla* was changed in order to belie these expectations.³⁹³ This marked a decisive separation of the Muslims from Jews and Judaism.

4.6.1 Critique of formalism from a Christian perspective

In response to the issue of the *qibla* Jean-Mohammed says, 'Intelligent Muslims must go beyond this geometric understanding of religion and strive towards a piety based on spirit and truth.'³⁹⁴ This is very suggestive of the Christian concept of worship 'in spirit and truth' as found in the Gospel of John Ch.4, which must almost certainly have been in Jean-Mohammed's mind at this point. The phrase occurs in the context of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. The woman says to Jesus: 'Our fathers worshipped on this mountain,³⁹⁵ though you say that Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.' Jesus answered, 'Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. God is Spirit, and those who worship must worship in spirit and truth.'³⁹⁶ However, Jean-Mohammed does admit that in general 'it would be very simplistic to reduce Muslim piety to empty formalism.... [although] it is true that the rites are minutely organised'. 'And it is not', he continues, 'a "light burden"'.³⁹⁷ Here again he appears to be drawing on his new found Christianity to critique Islam. The allusion

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30

³⁹² *Ibid.*

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 31. This is according to a tradition of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728 AH/1066 CE), a Hanbali scholar

³⁹⁴ *Aspects* p. 161.

³⁹⁵ Jn.4:20. A footnote in the New Jerusalem Bible explains that this is Gerizim, where the Samaritans had built a temple to rival the Jerusalem temple. It was destroyed by John Hyrcanus in 129 BC. See NJB p1751, Note f.

³⁹⁶ Jn.4: 21,24.

³⁹⁷ *Aspects* p. 179.

here is almost certainly to a saying of Jesus as recorded in Matthew's Gospel: 'Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light.'³⁹⁸

Finally, Jean-Mohammed hides away in the small type of a footnote an interesting quote, preceded by his own comment: 'The desire for God affirms itself', he says, 'despite official Islam's tendency to emphasise "the patience of God" without desire'. This difficult to translate phrase might seem to indicate that Jean-Mohammed sees in Islam much formal worship of a God who is endlessly merciful and patient with mankind's shortcomings, but in fact He wants something more of his creatures. The desire for God is there, but not in sufficient measure, he would seem to be saying, and it is inhibited by too much emphasis on formal worship. He goes on to quote Al-Bireaoui who makes reference in his book (1905) to a celebrated mystic of the ninth century; this mystic attributes to God the words: 'Everybody asks things of me; only Abou-Yazid asks for Me, myself.'³⁹⁹

4.7 Muslim Community and Christian Communities

This final chapter in Jean-Mohammed's *Aspects intérieurs de L'Islam* is very important for the understanding of how deep he perceives the gulf to be between Islam and Christianity, and how completely the former, from its first beginnings, has failed to understand Christianity. It is also, perhaps, his most overtly missionary chapter – not to Muslims, but to Christians, because he believes that they should be aware of how they are perceived, and take seriously the dialogue with Islam.

Jean-Mohammed begins by stating the fact that Islam has now existed alongside Christianity for fourteen centuries, and has largely established itself on her terrain, both intellectual as well as territorial. There are many elements in its doctrine and spiritual life similar to Christianity and Islam claims 'a plenitude of truth with regard to Christianity.'⁴⁰⁰ And as such, he argues, 'it poses a

³⁹⁸ Matt.11:28-30. Italics mine.

³⁹⁹ *Aspects* p. 231, footnote 208.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

problem so complete and arduous that many Christians avoid it by thinking of it as little as possible, or taking refuge in ready-made judgements, speedily arrived at and simplistic'.⁴⁰¹ In this he believes they are guilty of 'unconsciously colluding with the fundamental attitude of Muslim polemicists in their view of Christianity'. To begin to address this problem we must ask first of all, he says, what 'face' of Christianity, Islam has been able to know, before we pronounce judgements on what it has taken over or refused to accept. For Christianity appears to Muslims, even the most sophisticated, as 'distorted, and out of date'.⁴⁰² And thus they consider themselves authorised to 'reject the claims of the Catholic Church, and all other Christian communities, and themselves to represent the authentic tradition of Christ.'⁴⁰³ In order to understand this attitude better, Jean-Mohammed considers that it is necessary first of all to look again at the understanding Islam has of communities founded by the prophets, spanning the whole religious history of humanity.⁴⁰⁴

4.7.1 The Muslim Community

The Arabic word '*umma*' designates the Muslim community, and it unites Muslims across geographical, doctrinal, and juridical boundaries. Very little is required by way of belief to belong to this community; one has only to submit to the Law of God, who must be recognised as One Lord without Associates. There have been many prophets but their message is always the same whatever the time or place, be it pre-history or the sixth century CE, but no more prophets are to be expected after Muhammad, and each prophet has his own *umma*. The Christian community is the *umma* of Jesus, son of Mary, who is no doubt great and very privileged, but this community does not differ from other communities.'⁴⁰⁵ The community of Islam creates among its members 'a fraternal sentiment which can sometimes be very intense, and can make them quick to take offence at strangers'.⁴⁰⁶ Nevertheless it is found wanting, as Jean-Mohammed sees it from his Christian perspective. The Christian *umma*, by contrast, is very different:

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰² *Ibid.* p. 182.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 183. The rest of this paragraph is a distillation of what the Jean-Mohammed says on pp. 181-4.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

[Muslims] are the witnesses of Allah. There is no waiting for a Messiah as in Judaism... nor, as in Christianity, is there a community of love, a participation in the divine life, through and with Christ, by every man, and by all men together, in the Church, to co-operate with God towards the full realisation of his work, the gathering together of all things, in the unity of his love.⁴⁰⁷

As he looks back on Islam he sees that [despite the strong emphasis on *umma*] it affirms a 'separated' transcendence' and the 'absolute inaccessibility of God, and no divine favour – according to official doctrine – can make one '*capax Dei*' (apt for the communication of the mystery of God and participation in his life)'.⁴⁰⁸ Jean-Mohammed goes so far as to say that 'the understanding that classical Islam has of man, of the community, and of the creation in its entirety, reflects a radical atomism, where beings, people, and events constitute a perpetual recommencement, without development, or hierarchy.'⁴⁰⁹

Jean-Mohammed identifies an important aspect of this community, which is that each individual carries the weight of his own faults and may not take on the burden of others.⁴¹⁰ The contrasting Christian view on this, as found in St Paul, may have been in his mind here: 'Carry each other's burdens, that is how to keep the law of Christ'.⁴¹¹ Jean-Mohammed explains this by noting that human existence according to Islam is:

an unstable conglomeration to which God gives, from the outside, unity and coherence. Men among themselves are not united from within by the grace of a superior life in a profound unity which gives harmony to diversity. Their (Muslims') deeds are like "monads", closed in on themselves and juxtaposed, which God creates and recreates, second by second, and events succeed one another without any connection and with no other reason than the impenetrable will of God.⁴¹²

Such a stark comparison of two religious communities could perhaps only have been made by a convert. In addition to its revealing how Jean-Mohammed sees Muslim community from a Christian perspective, it highlights in a very real way the riches of Christian community which the Christian,

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.* The term *capax Dei*, literally, 'capable of God' is used frequently by the Fathers of the Church, e.g. St Augustine, to describe the Christian's ongoing, and growing capacity, begun at Baptism, to experience and receive divine grace.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.* In a footnote he gives several references: Q/164, 17/15, 35/18, 39/7, 53/38. See footnote 235, p. 234.

⁴¹¹ Galatians 6:2

⁴¹² *Aspects* p. 192.

through habituation, may perhaps have taken for granted.

4.7.2 Christian community: Islam's failure to understand

In this final section of his book, Jean-Mohammed wishes to make two main points, namely, the fact that Islam, from the beginning, has failed to understand Christianity, and that our relationship might find a way forward if the study of history were taken more seriously. This section, under the heading 'Christian community', tells us a great deal of how Jean-Mohammed understands Christianity, but also much about how Islam understands it. This can only be of help to Christians as we struggle with our mutual incomprehension.

Jean-Mohammed begins by addressing the matter of Islam not understanding Christianity. The *umma* of Muhammad, born in the seventh Christian century, he says, 'found itself facing several groups of believers claiming to be Christian, all disagreeing on doctrinal points of extreme gravity, touching even the idea of God.'⁴¹³ These groups did not appear to Muhammad to be able to represent the authentic teaching of Christ, and even today, 'true to itself, Islam contents itself with applying to Christianity its own understanding of history and its notion of *umma*', as found in the Qur'an'.⁴¹⁴ The divergences which opposed Christians to Jews, and these two communities to the disciples of Muhammad, were explained by the principle of *tahrif*, the falsification of the Scriptures before the advent of the Prophet.⁴¹⁵ Jews and Christians therefore are culpable, says Jean-Mohammed, 'not only of not faithfully following their doctrines, but of having corrupted them.'⁴¹⁶ Moreover, he continues, in Christianity religious leaders, 'in the name of these scriptures, have imposed on the faithful, [belief in] the Trinity, the divine Sonship of the Messiah, the crucifixion, the grace of adoption, and the friendship of God'.⁴¹⁷

4.7.3 The Church

The above is a succinct summary of the issues that divide us, about which Jean-Mohammed

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 193.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

⁴¹⁷ Q 5/20, *ibid.*

makes no further comment here, but simply goes on to say that ‘nowhere in the Qur’an is there any mention of a “Church” founded by this Christ and destined to continue his teachings and his example’, although it knows of Apostles and disciples.⁴¹⁸ Allusion is made, he says, to the ‘discussions of theologians and the doctrinal uncertainties of Christians’, but it is declared that the ‘divisions and hate that tear them apart are beyond remedy, the cause simply being that they do not adhere to the true message of Christ’.⁴¹⁹ They think, says Jean-Mohammed, ‘that it is the religious leaders who have given to certain texts – by an abuse of exegesis and with a motive to dominate consciences – meanings that the obvious sense of the words and sound reason reprove.’⁴²⁰

4.7.4 The need to study history

The conclusion to this section on Christian community is important, as Jean-Mohammed manages to pin-point accurately something at the heart of the problem of the misunderstanding of Christianity by Islam. By way of introduction he suggests that:

[a] more attentive examination and a more comprehensive attitude would lead them (Muslims) to make concessions comparable to those they are obliged to accord to Islam itself, whose history is littered from end to end with divergences [disagreements], oppositions and fights.... The study of history would demonstrate to Muslims that Christians are fully aware of their difficulties, far more than their adversaries would suspect⁴²¹

Jean-Mohammed is of the opinion, however, that these difficulties arise from the nature of the Christian message itself, its evolution over time, including its failures and human insufficiencies, in spite of which the faith of Christians remains strong and solidly founded.⁴²² In order to address this problem it is Jean-Mohammed’s conviction that:

[T]he study of history would show them [Muslims], precisely, that there has always been from the beginning, one Church, that stands out across the centuries, identical with herself for all that is essential, despite all the setbacks in its existence. This Church reproduces in a living manner, without sacrificing or simplifying anything, all the traits that characterise the life, doctrine, and work of Christ, as the Gospels represent them.⁴²³

⁴¹⁸ Q3/52. 61/4. *Aspects*, p. 195.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 197/8.

⁴²² *Ibid.* p. 198, Italics mine.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, p. 198/9.

The Gospel we now read, he stresses, is 'authentic', and moreover, 'becomes ever more certain, through the work of serious scholars, and beyond all the hypotheses and opinions that have been proposed to explain or annihilate it'.⁴²⁴ Thus he dismisses the problem of the 'falsification' of the scriptures. 'In truth' Jean-Mohammed concludes, 'the problem is more psychological and spiritual than intellectual', and in a final exhortation to Christians:

Muslims need to find in Christianity what the Qur'an says it should – that goodness, mercy and humility that characterises those who follow Jesus, son of Mary... it is necessary that the "catholicity" of the Church of Christ, that mysterious force, the Spirit which is in her, should be shown to Muslims to be at work, interiorly as well as exteriorly.⁴²⁵

This brief reference to the Spirit, not elaborated on by Jean-Mohammed, but undoubtedly well understood by him, points to another area which is lacking in Islam, and which it finds so difficult to comprehend in Christianity: the development of doctrine and growth of understanding, which in appearances can be 'messy', sometimes involving much strife, but this Holy Spirit is leading us surely, through and despite all our human failures and frailty, to the fullness of truth, still in the future, as promised by Jesus.⁴²⁶

Jean-Mohammed's very short final paragraph gives a glimpse of what Christianity has come to mean for him. After reminding his fellow Christians that 'our love must not be just words or mere talk, but something active and genuine' (1 Jn.3:18), he goes on to quote from a letter of St Ignatius of Antioch describing how this love expresses itself in the totality of creation. It is, he says, 'Jesus Christ pouring himself out in song, in harmony with all creation, in a great symphony of charity.' He completes the quotation by adding words of his own – 'charity which is not a means but an end, and is God himself'.⁴²⁷

5. Conclusion

In this chapter Jean-Mohammed has given a very honest, piercing critique of Islam as he sees it from his Christian perspective. He spells out in some detail what he means by the great gulf

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, p199.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁶ See the Gospel of John Ch.16:13.

⁴²⁷ *Aspects* p. 200.

that he sees as separating Islam and Christianity. What has been particularly instructive is his perception of how Islam, as he has known it, perceives Christianity, and that is rather more negatively than one might have expected. Also surprising is his perception of the prayer life of Muslims (which does not include 'private' prayer). To an outsider, Muslim prayers can seem very impressive and edifying, but Jean-Mohammed points out certain limitations as he sees it in comparison with what he has experienced of Christian prayer. This perception also applies to the *umma*, the Islamic community, which again to an outsider can seem very impressive, but considered by Jean-Mohammed to be inferior to Christian community.

The next chapter explores Hassan Dehqani-Tafti's writings after his conversion. These present a contrast with those of Jean-Mohammed as he for the most part attempts to explain Christianity to Muslims, or converts from Islam. As with the present chapter, there will be some extended discussion of certain themes, for instance the crucifixion.

CHAPTER 7

LOOKING BACK AT ISLAM: EXPLAINING CHRISTIANITY TO MUSLIMS: HASSAN DEHQANI-TAFTI

1 Introduction

This chapter presents a contrast to what has gone before in the discussion on the works of Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, due to the fact that Hassan is in a totally different situation and has no need to explain Islam to his congregation who, being mainly converts to Christianity, did not need to be taught about Islam. Also like his friend and mentor Kenneth Cragg, Hassan was at heart a missionary, and like him he is generally gentle in his approach, trying to make the crossing from Islam to Christianity as painless as he could for his flock, who in turn would be able to give an adequate explanation of what they had done to their Muslim families and friends. Here Hassan's missionary approach will be explored, as well as his relationship with Kenneth Cragg, followed by some discussion of Hassan's work *Chimes of Church Bells*, which will be found to draw very closely on Cragg's seminal work *The Call of the Minaret*.

2 Early Christian mission in Iran; attitudes to Islam

Hassan Dehqani-Tafti was exposed to Christianity along with Islam from an early age, as described in Ch.4 of thesis, and the Anglican missionaries who taught him at school most probably had a rather negative view of Islam, a factor which after his conversion caused him some tension. It is possible to assume this from some responses to a questionnaire sent out to the CMS (Church Missionary Society) missionaries before the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910. The recipients were 149 active missionaries representing different denominations and geographical regions. The responses in general were positive about non-Christian religions, but in a book reporting on the conference, Kenneth Cracknell says about the encounter with Islam:

As a later revelation, it knowingly rejected Christian truths and could not, therefore, be interpreted as a nascent tradition, open to fulfilment or completion through Christian transformation. Notably few respondents denounced Islam as satanic and, on the whole, courtesy was advocated in relationships with Muslims. However, most believed the only hope for Muslim salvation was in wholehearted acceptance of Christianity and complete

discontinuity with an Islamic past.¹

This attitude to Islam was general in Christianity at this time, and would have prevailed in the Catholic Church also. It would be such missionaries as these who were responsible for the conversion to Christianity of Hassan's mother, and his own attitude to Islam when he became interested in Christianity whilst still under their tutelage. It took the gentle influence of Kenneth Cragg, his lifelong friend and mentor, to help him see Islam in a more positive light.²

2.1 Hassan Dehqani-Tafti the missionary: his approach to the 'great commission'

As pastor of a church composed mainly of converts from Islam, Hassan was primarily occupied with the challenge of explaining Christianity to Muslims. He was an ardent missionary, as can be deduced from his heavily annotated copy of a book he had in his possession, *I believe in the Great Commission*, by Max Warren, who was General Secretary of the Church Missionary Society from 1952-1963.³ He has inscribed on the fly leaf 'H.B. Dehqani-Tafti, Cambridge, 1980'. This is the year after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, in the tragic aftermath of which circumstances forced him to become an exile in England, initially in Cambridge. The book is obviously well used and underlined in many places, and although he cannot have had it in his possession in the early years of his ministry, one could reasonably deduce that it registers deeply held convictions, long practiced in his ministry both as a priest and a bishop. The editor, Michael Green, concedes that the book is in many respects going against the tide, as it was then for, he says, it describes a very 'exclusive' approach, which is less in evidence today. He says:

¹ The book by Cracknell *Justice, Courtesy and Love*, is quoted by Gulnar Eleanor Francis-Dehqani (the youngest daughter of Hassan) in her book *Religious Feminism in an Age of Empire: CMS Women Missionaries in Iran, 1869-1934*, Monograph Series 4 from the Centre for Comparative Studies in Religion and Gender, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Bristol, 200, p. 61..

² Kenneth Cragg (1813-1914) educated at Blackpool Grammar School and Jesus College, Oxford, became an Anglican bishop, in which capacity he exercised a wide and varied ministry, especially in the Middle East where for a time he was assistant bishop in the Anglican Archdiocese of Jerusalem. He has also taught philosophy in various institutions, but is best known as arguably the leading scholar of Islam and Arabic in our day. His seminal work, *The Call of the Minaret*, has been followed by over forty books which have made a huge contribution to our understanding of Islam. For a succinct yet penetrating study of his life and work see the article by the Revd. Christopher Brown (Colchester) in *ARAM, the Journal of the ARAM Society for Syro-Mesopotamian Studies*, Vol.20 (2008), pp. 375-391.

³ Published by Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1976. I am grateful to Guli, Hassan's youngest daughter, for the loan of this book which belonged to her father.

We live in an age when everything is relative, nothing absolute; when nothing is black and white, everything different shades of grey. And to maintain that Christianity is true, that Jesus really is the way to God, and that obedience to him inevitably carries with it the imperative to mission, is thoroughly unpopular. It accords ill with contemporary religious agnosticism, apathy, and syncretism. It savours of intolerance and arrogance.⁴

Hassan had managed to avoid these latter tendencies and to reconcile his strong urge to preach the Gospel with a deep understanding of the constraints and demands, but also the opportunities, of religious pluralism. Chapter 8 of the book, entitled *Religious Pluralism*,⁵ is heavily underlined. It speaks of the transition in missionary practice from 'dogmatic triumphalism' to a 'certain despair' some Christians felt in the face of 'the cold breath of agnosticism and relativism', which sometimes caused them to swing to the other extreme and 'talk happily of different roads to the summit'.⁶ Hassan has then underlined a section which would suggest he does not believe that the 'great commission' should be held in suspense in these circumstances, or for any reason, and he underlines the question, 'Is courtesy always to preclude contradiction?'⁷

However, underlying the sentiments expressed above is a very basic conviction which informed all his missionary work, which is that before being subject to any preaching *about* Christianity, 'they [of other religions] must see Jesus *in us*.'⁸ In other words, unless the preacher demonstrates in his life what he preaches, his words will not be taken seriously. There are many underlined passages in this book, and although one cannot know exactly why in individual instances, one could suggest that it was because they resonated strongly with him for some reason; it could have been a question he wanted to pursue further, or a strongly held conviction. One such passage, a subsection of Ch.10 ('Obeying the Great Commission Now and Tomorrow') which is more likely to be the second possibility is entitled *The missionary as lover*, and speaks eloquently of the patience of God:

Would we be so very wrong were we to say that patience is the greatest of all his attributes?
For what is patience but love in action, love waiting, love suffering, love pursuing, love ever

⁴ Editor's Preface, (Michael Green). The words in Italics are those underlined by Hassan.

⁵ *I Believe in the Great Commission*, *op.cit.* pp. 147-152.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 150.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

respecting our freedom? ⁹ 'For if (the missionary) knows himself, he knows he has already tried the patience of God to the limit. He must show to others what God has shown to him.'¹⁰

In this it is possible to glimpse something of Hassan's own relationship with God, from which all his missionary activity springs. It is clear that he has firmly grasped the fact that for Christianity God *is* Love, a belief not so clearly expressed in Islam. Also it is possible to see an echo of Kenneth Cragg's style, which in fact is nothing but the expression of the quintessentially Christian conviction that God is the Lover and Saviour of all humanity, Muslims as well as Christians. Of Cragg, in this respect, Hassan and his daughter Guli have said: 'Cragg's generosity of spirit to Muslims and Islam, his open approach towards faith as something that could be probed and questioned, and ultimately his deep commitment to the *love that suffers* left indelible traces on the young community [in Iran].'¹¹ For as the above-mentioned subsection concludes, 'Being a missionary, anywhere, is to be a lover. There is no other way.'¹²

3 Hassan Dehqani-Tafti: 'Pilgrimage to Christianity'

The above describes Hassan in the maturity of his Christian faith, but it was not always so, and much of the transformation is due to the influence of Kenneth Cragg. Hassan's conversion, unlike that of Jean Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, (who nevertheless had the same struggle with doctrinal issues) was a slow process. He describes it thus:

With regard to my religious beliefs, I cannot say precisely when one belief was shattered by another, and how long I had to wrestle with any particular idea before accepting it. To put it briefly, I have had to travel in my mind from Islam to Christianity and from both to agnosticism, and then back again to the foot of the Cross of Jesus Christ.¹³

He describes his difficulty with the transition from a Muslim to a Christian understanding of the nature of God, for instance, thus:

Was there really a God? Why did he create this world with all its defects and imperfections, cruelties and injustices? Why should floods, earthquake and famine kill off millions of people, men, women and children? Where was God's greatness then? Where was God's

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *By Their Fruits shall you know them*, Hassan B. Dehqani-Tafti and Guli E. Francis-Dehqani, in *A Faithful Presence*, p. 55. Italics mine.

¹² Max Warren, *op.cit.*, p. 178.

¹³ H.B. Dehqani-Tafti, *Design of My World: Pilgrimage to Christianity, op.cit.* p. 60/1.

love? What was the purpose of the whole thing? The fact that I was told that God was one, unchanging, merciful, and that he was not compound and not matter and not visible, did not make the slightest difference to my essential problems. How can these terms heal the man who is sick at heart? I could not very well trust a God who only reveals Himself through nature, through the prophets, and through books and systems of law. It became obvious to me that if there was a God, He should take the initiative, and reveal Himself personally to man... It was the fact of the Incarnation which made me fall in love with Christianity... To a Muslim the very idea of God becoming man is blasphemous, but it was this 'blasphemy' that saved me from unbelief. I cannot see any blasphemy in this gracious act of God. Only the God who would enter his creation in the form of a servant in order to heal our ills is irresistible. He is for me.¹⁴

Hassan, being very sensitive, struggled with the world as he saw it; natural disasters as well as the man-made ones which, as today, can lead people to agnosticism and even atheism, and this concerned him greatly. It was the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation whereby God involves himself in a very real way with his creation which rescued him from agnosticism. After such a struggle it cannot have been easy for Hassan to look back on Islam with sympathy, and it is precisely here where the influence of Kenneth Cragg was crucial. He played no small part in shaping much of Hassan's thought and his approach to his Muslim compatriots, as I aim to show.¹⁵

3.1 The influence of Kenneth Cragg

One of the stages in Hassan's ongoing conversion process was the necessity of adopting an attitude to Islam from his Christian perspective. In Lewis Rambo's 'sequential stage models' (see Ch.3, 3.4.1 of thesis), 'encounter' is one of these stages.¹⁶ A significant encounter can be instrumental in the conversion process. Here I suggest that Hassan's encounter with Kenneth Cragg was just such an encounter.

Kenneth Cragg and Hassan became lifelong friends, but beyond that, he was for Hassan a mentor and model, as he has been for so many others who seek to understand Islam from the inside. They first met in Isfahan when Hassan was a young priest in charge of St. Luke's church, and

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 62 – 65 passim.

¹⁵ The relationship is described in *A Faithful Presence: Essays for Kenneth Cragg*, ed. David Thomas and Clare Amos, London, Melisende 2003, p. 42. This volume is a collection of essays by a variety of people for Cragg's 90th birthday. The one here referred to is from *By their Fruits you shall know them*, by Hassan himself and his youngest daughter Guli E. Francis-Dehqani.

¹⁶ See Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion, op.cit.* Ch7, *Encounter between Advocate and Convert*, pp. 87-101.

Cragg was the Travelling Study Secretary of the then Near East Council of Churches. He paid several visits to this church between 1957 and 1966, and Hassan would travel round the country with him as his interpreter. The Anglican Church, to which both belonged, came into existence in this part of the world in the latter part of the nineteenth century through the missionary efforts of the CMS (Church Missionary Society). This Society, according to the spirit of the times, had a very Victorian-style approach to evangelism, which implied a very self-confident – almost triumphalistic, Christianity, with scant respect (which did not exclude love and concern for all practical needs) for the indigenous culture, especially Islam, its religion. Hassan was inevitably under the influence of these missionaries during his education and conversion process. Their spirit is captured well in Guli Francis-Dehqani's doctoral thesis *Religious Feminism in an Age of Empire*.¹⁷ Many of these missionaries were women, and their strong and indomitable character is well brought out. These women 'were able to identify with Persian women on some level', and 'recognised various social problems and sought to alleviate them. However they were too easily persuaded that these resulted from the evils of indigenous culture and religion... East was compared unfavourably with West, and Islam denounced as the cause of Iranian (especially women's) degradation'.¹⁸ In addition they undoubtedly had a very 'exclusive' approach to interreligious dialogue. By contrast, Kenneth Cragg's 'gentle humility and manner of explaining his more inclusive ideas fascinated Hassan'.¹⁹ He found himself 'being released from the prison he had been living in, a prison whose walls had been constructed over many years of trying to understand and explain Christianity in the stock clichés of evangelical language.'²⁰ In his gradual appropriation of Cragg's attitude to Islam, Hassan inevitably rejected the approach of these missionaries, which did not exclude a profound respect for them as individuals, as exemplified in his lifelong relationship with Miss Kingdon who was responsible for the conversion of his mother.²¹

Cragg's method of dealing with the relationship between Islam and Christianity was

¹⁷ Gulnar Eleanor Francis-Dehqani, *Religious Feminism in an Age of Empire: CMS Missionaries in Iran, 1869-1934*, *op.cit.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21/2.

¹⁹ *By their fruits shall you know them*, in *A Faithful Presence*, p. 44.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²¹ See for instance, Ch.4, 8.1 of thesis, which describes Hassan's final encounter with Miss Kingdon.

considered by Hassan to be ‘new and alternative’ by comparison with the CMS missionaries, who maintained ‘a Victorian-style approach to evangelism as the backbone of a self-confident Christianity.’²² Hassan vividly recalls evangelically zealous Christians opposing Cragg strongly... as they clung to the ‘familiar language of old clichés based on the traditional exclusive approach...’²³ Cragg’s approach could be summed up in an idea remembered of him, but not pinned down to any particular reference in his writings: ‘not to proselytise but to present, having first possessed, to share possession’.²⁴ However Hassan himself did not take to Cragg’s ideas immediately: he did believe Christians should respect other religions and learn from them, but the ‘weight of conservative Christianity made him feel that Cragg’s generosity and understanding was going too far’.²⁵ Hassan’s response to *The Call of the Minaret*, published about this time (1955) had been to ask: ‘Did he not think he was imposing Christian meanings onto Islamic ideas? Was he not interpreting Islam according to Christian methodologies?’²⁶ There may be some truth in these accusations, but Cragg’s response was to ask him: ‘Why should we not be hospitable towards those who are different? If you are secure in your own home... the more hospitality you show to your guests the better the relationship will be.’²⁷ Another reason which Hassan gives for why Cragg’s approach was better received by Muslims could have been that he did not speak ‘purely as a scholar’, but found his motivation ‘in the depths of faith’, and was in addition ‘a deeply loving teacher’.²⁸

Hassan himself later wrote several books to help ‘Muslim Christians’ understand the intricacies of Christian doctrine. One in particular *Chimes of Church Bells*,²⁹ now to be explored, is a clear echo of the second part of *The Call of the Minaret*, and so as background and introduction to this work, that we might better understand his thought and influence on Hassan, it is appropriate at

²² *By their Fruits you shall know them, op.cit.*, p. 44.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49. This pithy expression could neatly sum up the approach of *The Call of the Minaret*, to be discussed.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Published by Sohrab Books, Basinstoke, 1987. This is only available in Persian apart from an unpublished English translation which will be used here. The other books are only available in Persian.

this stage to look briefly at Cragg's seminal work.

3.2 The Call of the Minaret

Kenneth Cragg has written many books but it is arguable that this, his first, has had the greatest impact on Christian/Muslim relations. At least it has helped Christians understand Islam, although it may not have had much impact on Muslim understanding of Christianity. Cragg's main argument in the book is the failure of Islam to understand Jesus Christ as he really is (according to Christianity) in the Gospels, the life of the Church and in the lives of ordinary Christians. The problem is that if Islam really went this far in its understanding and acceptance of Jesus, all Muslims would be potentially, if not in fact, Christians, and Cragg's subtle missionary endeavour would be accomplished. Christopher Lamb states that 'it is understandable, though to Cragg no doubt disappointing, that many Muslim reviewers of his books did not take up his central theological concerns but were satisfied to regard his works as simply a more sophisticated attack on Islam than the traditional missionary approach.'³⁰ He goes on to quote one Muslim reviewer of *The Call of the Minaret*, the Pakistani scholar A.L Tabawi, who says that 'this book gives a new look to Christian polemics against Islam and presents a sugar-coated pill.'³¹ However there is no doubt that many Christians have been helped by it to find a way into Islam

The Call of the Minaret falls into three unequal parts. The first, and shortest, is a lengthy Introduction. Entitled *Change and Continuity*, it is a historical/geographical survey of Islam from the latter half of the nineteenth century to the late twentieth century, which in the second edition is expanded to take in the event of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. This section deals with a range of sociological and political topics while making the important point that Islam has the capacity to change; something which is especially called for in today's world when nations and religions mingle as never before. In Part II we are invited to sit with Cragg at the feet, as it were, of the muezzin who calls the faithful to prayer from the minaret of the mosque every day. This is an original approach to Islam as the Christian reader must try to listen with him, in a spirit of prayerful reverence, to what

³⁰ Christopher A. Lamb, *A Policy of Hope: Kenneth Cragg and Islam*, London, Melisende, 2014, p. 161.

³¹ Hamidullah, M., in *Islamic Quarterly*, 3:3 and 4 (January 1957)

this 'call' is saying to Muslims, that he or she might understand. The next section, Part III, by far the largest and arguably the most important, is an attempt to respond to the muezzin's call from a Christian perspective by expounding Christian doctrine with a Muslim readership in mind. It is what Cragg calls 'retrieval', that is, making clear, 'retrieving', what has been so tragically misunderstood by Islam.

At this stage we might ask the question, as Cragg himself does in another book, *Jesus and the Muslim*: 'Why cannot Christians just live and let live? 'Why should it bother us that Muslims do not understand and accept Jesus in the same way that Christians do? Is not the task too difficult, the obstacles too huge, and the deterrents too formidable?'³² For most, the answer to the second question would be a resounding 'yes', but the first – why should it bother us? - continues to trouble, for it can be said of any committed Christian as it was of Cragg: 'The preciousness of Christ is the core of his convictions.'³³ And as he has said in this third section of *The Call of the Minaret*: 'If one sought a single justification for the Christian mission to Islam, it would be in the Quranic picture of Jesus'... and 'the emasculated Jesus of the Qur'an must be rescued from misconception and disclosed in all his relevance.'³⁴ Other topics are dealt with in this section, notably the idea of God, the doctrine of the Trinity, of the Holy Spirit, and the Church, but do not quite reach the same degree of passion and conviction as when he writes of Jesus Christ.

Has Cragg succeeded in his enterprise? The answer cannot be an unqualified Yes, but he has certainly achieved a great deal. First of all there is the clarity and beauty of his exposition of Islam in the first two sections of *The Call of the Minaret*. Hassan considered he had done this better than some of the Muslim teachers he had heard.³⁵ If a Muslim, albeit a convert to Christianity, can say this we know we can have confidence in Cragg's understanding of Islam and his ability to explain it to outsiders. A certain negative Muslim reception is understandable; A.L. Tabawi, for instance,

³² *Jesus and the Muslim: an Exploration*, London, 1985, p. 290, quoted by Jane I. Smith, *Balancing Divergence and Convergence, or 'Is God the Author of Confusion?'* in *A Faithful Presence*, p. 39.

³³ Clive Handford, in the Introduction to *A Faithful Presence*, *op.cit.* p. 16.

³⁴ *The Call of the Minaret*, *op.cit.* p. 234/5.

³⁵ *By Their Fruits you shall Know Them*, in *A Faithful Presence*, *op.cit.*, p. 45.

described Cragg as ‘frankly a missionary whose object is to convert Muslims to Christianity or at least make them accept Jesus not simply as one of God’s prophets but as Christ, the Son of God.’³⁶

However this does not detract from its positive value in helping Christians to understand Islam a little better, and at least trying to explain Christianity, especially as concerns the person of Jesus Christ, to Muslims. Hassan’s book, *Chimes of Church Bells*, draws its inspiration from the final section of *The Call*, as will be seen in the next section.

4 Hassan Dehqani-Tafti and *Chimes of Church Bells*

By his choice of title Hassan clearly intended to link his work to *The Call of the Minaret*, of which it is undoubtedly an ‘echo’. In the Preface he explains that the book began as ‘a series of regular monthly articles entitled “Payam e Mohabat” (Message of Love) – the complete version of which he has now put into book form.’³⁷ Also in the Preface he indicates his indebtedness to Cragg: ‘In writing this book’, he says, ‘I have benefitted greatly from the research and writings of Western spiritual leaders and Islamic scholars, particularly the work of Dr. Kenneth Cragg.’³⁸ He likewise acknowledges similar pastoral and missionary concerns, when he declares:

If *Chimes of Church Bells* can serve to minimise hatred or suspicion between people of different faiths; if I can play a part in creating respectful dialogue and understanding of each other’s views and beliefs, and if it can help to increase the reader’s knowledge of Christianity, then I shall be grateful to Almighty God.³⁹

The intention here is to show Hassan’s concern to help Muslims, in whose midst he lived and ministered, to better understand Christianity, and how in this concern he followed Cragg closely in word and spirit – though not slavishly, sometimes modifying Cragg’s language to suit his own audience. Inevitably he is speaking as a Muslim also as, like Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, his former adherence to Islam remained dear to him as a Christian, and so we are able to access Islam as well as Christianity from his insider perspective.

³⁶ Hugh Goddard, *op.cit.* p. 91.

³⁷ Preface, p. i, unpublished translation. I am indebted to Hassan’s daughter Shirin for the translation of this part of the book, and to Kathryn Taheri for translation of the main text.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

4.1 The necessity of personal knowledge of Jesus Christ

One of Hassan's chief concerns, as was Cragg's, was that Jesus is simply not known by Muslims, since the Qur'an gives such an anaemic picture of him. He says, for instance:

Until we can ourselves comprehend the character and nature of a person, we are unable to describe to anyone else and truly express what they are like... only when we have opened up our minds and hearts to someone and are influenced by their character are we really able to claim to know them as they truly are.⁴⁰

This, according to Hassan, is at the basis of the theological language of the Creeds which appeared later using such language as 'Son of God': without a prior personal relationship with Jesus, he believes, they could not have been formulated.⁴¹ Cragg has expressed the same sentiments in his own inimitable style, and rather more forcefully than Hassan:

Consider the Quranic Jesus alongside the New Testament. How sadly attenuated is this Christian prophet as Islam knows him! Where are the stirring words, the deep insights, the compelling qualities of him who was called the Master? The mystery of his self-consciousness as the Messiah is unsuspected; the tender, searching intimacy of his relationship to the disciples undiscovered... There is in the Qur'an neither Galilee nor Gethsemane... Even Bethlehem is unknown by name and its greatest night is remote and strange. Is the Sermon on the Mount never to be heard in the Muslim world? Must the story of the Good Samaritan never be told there?⁴²

And so it goes on - a story of ignorance of Jesus in the Muslim world. However, it could be argued that 'anaemic', as used by both Hassan and Cragg, is the wrong word to use of the Jesus of the Qur'an. It is true that he is not given the status of Son of God, but he is profoundly respected, full of mystery beyond the words of the book: he is a 'word' of God, and a 'spirit' from God (Q4:171). These titles are very suggestive, and given to no other prophet in the Qur'an. Likewise the attempts in Islamic tradition to deny his crucifixion are because of concern for his honour. Crucifixion is the most degrading end imaginable, and it is understandable that Islam rebels against such an end for a prophet. This issue will be addressed later in the chapter.

In a statement ignored by Hassan, Cragg declares that 'the loss of Christ [in Islam]

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* Ch.2 *The Identity of Jesus*, p. 11/12.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴² *The Call of the Minaret* p. 235.

necessarily argues a delinquent Christianity'.⁴³ He backs up this statement with a brief summary of some of the inadequacies and shortcomings of early Christianity, which meant that 'Muhammad never knew at first hand the authentic Christianity of the New Testament.'⁴⁴ This is possibly true to some extent, but it is noticeable that Hassan does not make any such comments, which would seem to be a wise course when he has actual Muslims among whom he lives in view. There certainly were errors and failures in early Christianity as the Church groped its way towards the now well-known Christological formulas of the Creeds, but I would argue that Cragg is wrong in attributing the deficiencies of the Qur'an with regard to the person of Jesus to these aforementioned errors, and Hassan was wise to ignore him here.⁴⁵

5 The Incarnation – an expression of God's greatness

The Christian recognition of the divinity of Jesus as manifested in the Incarnation, and the reality of his crucifixion and resurrection, are major stumbling blocks preventing a real understanding developing between Muslims and Christians. The fact that God became man is heresy to Islam because the greatness of God, who is far beyond anything human, would not allow it. But as we have already seen in the life of Hassan, it is this very 'heresy' that drew him to Christianity.⁴⁶ Hassan's convictions are very strong and personal, but his way of putting them across to his Muslim audience follows Cragg closely. He has tried to show that far from offending against the greatness of God, it is in fact the opposite that is true. First in the words of Hassan:

Our belief in the divinity of Christ is not blasphemous, nor does it insult his unity. Rather it reveals the generosity and extraordinary greatness of our almighty God who became incarnate in order to create a direct relationship with humanity without any kind of intermediary... the Qur'an describes God with such words as 'the Great Almighty', and 'Above everything worthy of worship'. Such descriptions emphasise the great distance which separates God the Creator who is all-knowing and almighty, from his weak and sinful creation.... Christianity professes that God made direct contact with humanity through Jesus Christ. For Muslims, who believe that God 'sends' messengers but does not 'come' in person and that God 'has numerous blessings' but does not 'bring' the blessings himself, such a

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Jean-Mohammed, at the end of the previous chapter, makes the point forcefully that Muslims have been through many disagreements and struggles in the same way as Christians, and a study of the early history of both religions would make this clear.

⁴⁶ See the quote from *Design of My World; A Pilgrimage to Christianity*, section 3 above.

belief does not fit in with their concept of a great and glorious God. For these reasons the way that God is conceived in Christianity seems offensive and irreverent to Muslims. God cannot become human because by doing so he would forego his divine nature. It is therefore in defence of the greatness of God that Muslims refuse to believe in the incarnation of Christ.⁴⁷

The point (underlined) about the defence of the greatness of God is very important to stress in a context of dialogue, as it demonstrates the loftiness of the motive when Muslims criticise a Christian doctrine. This can only help mutual understanding. The same will be seen later in the context of the general Muslim denial of the reality of the crucifixion. The question here is: Is the Incarnation really a denial of the greatness of God, or even something impossible for him to do if he really wanted to?

Cragg has emphasised the same point, that is, that the Muslim conception of the greatness of God would not allow that he should become a mere man. However since according to Christianity this has happened he asks, somewhat provocatively:

Are we right in forbidding anything to God which he does not forbid himself? If God is truly greater than all will there be things God will not do that we can identify and 'forbid'?... Must not God be left to determine the steps of the divine purpose and shall we say no? If so, then we can never say that the Incarnation could not be. If it cannot be denied as a possibility, then any claims of its occurrence cannot be ruled out in advance.⁴⁸

This appeal to logic may not convince many Muslims in practice, but on the level of reason it is unassailable, and Hassan has not hesitated to use Cragg's approach. For Christians there is much more involved than whether God can or cannot take human form; it was an act of love and solidarity with humankind that led directly to that greatest of Christian mysteries, the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Finally, in the words of Hassan, a convert who has been overwhelmed by the reality of the Incarnation:

Through this act the greatness and wonder and beauty of God is clearer than at any other time in history. Humanity had become dominated by the forces of ignorance and evil. How then could an almighty and all-powerful God fail to intervene directly to free mankind from these dreadful circumstances? When Christians proclaim that God was present in Christ, they are praising the beauty and greatness of God.⁴⁹

It might be asked at this point if Hassan is merely imitating Cragg here, and in other

⁴⁷ *Chimes of Church Bells*, p. 14, underlining mine.

⁴⁸ *The Call of the Minaret*, p. 263.

⁴⁹ *Chimes*, p. 15.

examples quoted, or just following him as one might a spiritual master at whose feet one has been privileged to sit. In a certain sense this could be answered in the affirmative. Hassan was certainly a scholar but not the renowned scholar of Islam that Cragg was. However, as has been demonstrated in the examples given, Hassan frequently toned down Cragg's language, or omitted certain points or manners of expression, to adapt creatively to his own readers/listeners. Hassan is normally speaking as if to an individual that he is addressing personally, presumably with his congregation in mind, whereas Cragg in a more impersonal way is addressing not only Muslims but the religion of Islam itself. In this he can be much freer in the way he expresses himself, and as such he does occasionally provoke and challenge, and is not afraid to say when a Muslim doctrine 'offends deeply' Christian sensibilities (see below, in the context of the crucifixion, for instance). Hassan is always careful to tone down such language, as he may understand better than Cragg could 'Muslim sensibilities'.

6 The Crucifixion

Hassan devotes a considerable number of pages to the discussion of this topic, indicative of how important he considers it to be that his Muslim brothers should arrive at a greater understanding of its import. And because of its fundamental importance to Christian/Muslim understanding it will receive some extended treatment here, and also in the next chapter. Hassan states:

[The crucifixion] represents a fundamental truth and message of the Christian faith which has been altered in the Islamic tradition, hence creating a great distance between the two religions. We must look therefore to see how it is possible to heal this split, or at the very least, to build a bridge of understanding over it.⁵⁰

Again it is noticeable, no doubt with his own pastoral situation in mind, that he does not use Cragg's more emotive language, especially where he says that the Muslim reinterpretation 'offends deeply against all that the Gospels disclose about the self-giving of Jesus, his awareness of the inevitability of suffering, and his surrender to its necessity.'⁵¹

All the difficulties concerning the crucifixion revolve around one very difficult surah of the

⁵⁰ *Chimes of Church Bells*, p. 17.

⁵¹ *The Call of the Minaret*, p. 267. Underlining mine.

Qur'an, an accurate analysis of which is vital to achieving a better understanding between Christians and Muslims). Hassan explains as follows:

And because of their saying (in boast), 'We killed Messiah 'Iesa (Jesus), son of Maryam (Mary), the Messenger of Allah, - but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but the resemblance of 'Iesa (Jesus) was put over another man (and they killed that man), and those who differ therein are full of doubts. They have no (certain) knowledge, they follow nothing but conjecture. For surely; they killed him not (i.e. 'Iesa (Jesus), son of Maryam (Mary)).⁵²

By his own additions in brackets, Hassan has tried to make it as clear as possible for his Muslim audience. The main issue at stake here is the reality of the crucifixion, that is, its historicity. Did it really happen? There is also the question of the fate in general of prophets and messengers of God who, according to Islam, are always finally vindicated against their enemies, a pattern into which Jesus manifestly does not fit. Then there is the question of the supposed substitution of another victim who was believed to have been killed in Jesus' place which, if it were true, suggests the need to ask a much deeper question – what is the nature of a God who would allow this to happen?. Before we give Hassan's views on this matter, there follows some explanation of the role of prophets in Islam, for whom Jesus was one of the greatest, but refused to fit into the traditional pattern of the career of a prophet.

6.1 Prophecy according to Islam and the substitution theory

The question of the fate of prophets and the substitution theory are here addressed together, as they are closely linked. Because all the prophets in the Qur'an were always finally vindicated, it is assumed that this must always be so. To this general principle, according to Islam, Jesus can be no exception, and therefore he cannot have met the tragic end described in the Gospels; hence the tradition of the substitution of another in his place. To illustrate the principle involved Hassan briefly describes the careers of Abraham, Moses, Noah and Muhammad, all of whom, despite opposition, were finally vindicated in their mission. But in the case of Jesus, says Hassan: 'Muslims are of the opinion that Jesus was made to suffer at the hands of his own people but that whilst the people wanted to crucify Jesus, God intervened and miraculously saved him from

⁵² Qur'an, surah 4:157. *Chimes* p. 17.

death, putting someone else to death in Jesus' place.⁵³ Cragg has made the same point, but adding that it was the hostility of his own people that shaped the situation from which Jesus was supposedly rescued by the substitution of someone else, 'possibly Judas Iscariot', whom they were made to mistake for Jesus.⁵⁴ Hassan, in his role as a preacher of the Gospel, addresses his listeners in a more pastoral tone: He says:

How different this version is to Jesus' words as recorded in the Gospels. Jesus who said of his own death: 'Shall I not drink from the cup which the Father has bestowed unto me?' (John 18:11).⁵⁵ The Ahmadiyya Movement has tried to find evidence in Kashmir relating to this subject and yet their efforts have been unsuccessful.⁵⁶

Todd Lawson has examined the exegetical tradition from Muhammad's time up to the present, in some depth, and observes that '[a]ll of the exegetes who broach the problem agree that someone was crucified, but few agree on the victim, except that it was not Jesus.'⁵⁷ The 'substitution theories' examined are divided into two main categories, that is, those favouring a 'volunteer substitution', and those that claim it is inflicted on someone as a punishment.⁵⁸ One example will suffice to give a flavour of this type of literature. It is from Ibn Kathir (d.774/1373):

[T]he Jews notified the King of Syria [where Jesus was presumed to have fled] that there was a man in the holy house who was charming and subverting the people. The king wrote to his deputy in Jerusalem to be on guard against this. Moreover the deputy was instructed to crucify the culprit (Jesus). The deputy obeyed the order and led a group of Jews to where Jesus was staying with his twelve or thirteen followers. When Jesus was aware that they were after him, he asked for a volunteer to take his place. One stepped forward and was taken by the Jews, while Jesus himself was raised through the roof of the house.⁵⁹

Apparently there is little in the pertinent literature that makes even an initial attempt to trace the origin of the substitution theory.⁶⁰ Lawson concludes that the denial of the crucifixion seems to be

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Minaret*, p. 266.

⁵⁵ *Chimes*, p. 18. Cragg also quotes this saying of Jesus, *Minaret* p 266.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17. No further explanation seems to be necessary for Hassan's Muslim audience. The founder of this movement, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-89) believed himself to be the Messiah. He also claimed that 'Jesus escaped death on the cross only to travel to Kashmir where he died and was buried in Srinagar.' See Gavin Picken, *Ahmadis*, in *encyclopaedia of Islamic civilisation and religion*, ed. Ian Richard Netton, p. 31.

⁵⁷ Todd Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought*, Oxford, Oneworld 2008, p. 66.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

‘a rejection of Christian soteriology more than a disclaimer of the event of the crucifixion.’⁶¹

6.2.The Historicity of the Crucifixion

Concerning the actual historicity of the crucifixion, for both Hassan and Cragg there is no question of it being in doubt. Hassan describes his position as follows:

History has clearly expressed the crucifixion of Jesus; aside from the many writings which remain from Christians living in the first and second centuries, non-Christian writers and even those who opposed Christianity have also written accounts referring to the crucifixion. For example Pliny, who lived during the years 98 and 117AD and who ruled over the region of Asia Minor, in his report to the Trojan emperor, refers to the existence of Christians, Christ and the crucifixion. These writings still exist today. Based on this evidence, those who do not accept that the crucifixion of Jesus occurred, are either ignoring reality because they would rather it never happened and in so doing have effectively rewritten history themselves, or else, as is the viewpoint of Christianity, the Church was born through Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection from the dead.⁶²

Of course the history of an event can never be absolutely proved, or accurately recalled, especially centuries after it took place. However it may be noted that the (Catholic) Church has never felt the need to define the crucifixion as a major tenet of the faith, even in the face of centuries of Muslim denial. This is because the Church is not just a society commemorating and trying to live by the words and example of Jesus, but is his living presence in the world. This reality is built on the making present of the paschal mystery (the death and resurrection of Jesus) in the sacrament of the Eucharist which not only commemorates these events but renders them actually present. The Church as we know it would be meaningless without this. Regarding the historicity of the crucifixion, Cragg states bluntly, ‘...history is plain enough. If Muslims do not follow it, it is because their prejudgement has intervened arbitrarily to break its course and to disallow what it wills to reject.’⁶³

It is noticeable here that Cragg’s language is more forthright than Hassan’s – it could be presumed that he is addressing Islam as a religion rather than individual Muslims for whom he might have had a pastoral responsibility, and he plainly states that it is unacceptable that historical fact should be cast aside in this way.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁶² *Chimes of Church Bells*, p. 18.

⁶³ *Minaret* p. 267.

6.2.1 The argument from 'common sense'

The Qur'an does not in fact deny the historicity of the crucifixion, and if this were generally understood the gulf separating Christians and Muslims need not be completely unbridgeable, at least in this particular area. However, to further support the belief in the truth of the historicity of the crucifixion, Hassan has drawn on an argument from what might be called 'common sense'.

Bringing in the resurrection which is intrinsically connected to the crucifixion, he says:

Remembering these two events is the main purpose and basis of Christian worship, that is to say the Lord's Supper, which has been celebrated by the Christian population from the beginnings of Christianity to today. If then the death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection from the dead on the third day are considered to be apocryphal or invented (if they are not fact then they must be fiction), one has to ask who invented them? The Church could not fabricate the cause of its own coming into existence, nor could it commemorate an event in its worship which had never occurred in the first place.⁶⁴

I have emphasised this point with some explanation in the previous section. Of course it could be argued that the Christian church could have come into being without these two events of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus by, for instance, perpetuating Jesus' teaching and the memory of his miracles etc. in a kind of loose association, but it would not be the Church that is in evidence today

We now look at a further insight onto the 'crucifixion verse' which throws more light on the difficulties involved by examining the text in its context.

6.2.2 A perspective from Qur'anic studies on Q.4.157

A perspective from Qur'anic studies shows that in fact the Qur'an need not be read as denying the crucifixion. This contemporary movement was not in existence when Hassan was alive, but he would undoubtedly have approved of its way of approaching the Qur'an. The verse in question concerning the crucifixion which has been discussed by Hassan above, reads as follows:

They did not kill him and they did not crucify him, but it appeared so unto them.

Only some knowledge of the Arabic language could enable the reader to unlock the

⁶⁴ *Chimes*, p. 18.

complexities of this verse and the endless variations in its exegesis,⁶⁵ but for Christians, the majority of whom do not have such knowledge, the matter need not be so complex. The problem in the past has been twofold: the fact that ‘western scholars have relied altogether too much on the Muslim exegetical tradition’, and secondly, ‘the prevalent method of studying Qur’anic verses in isolation’ has hindered understanding.⁶⁶ The point both Todd Lawson and Gabriel Said Reynolds make is that whether or not Jesus died ‘is simply not the matter in hand’⁶⁷; it is only ‘parenthetic in the support of the reprehensible actions of a group who esteemed themselves Jews.’⁶⁸ These actions are given in the verses immediately preceding the so-called ‘crucifixion verse’, on which Reynolds comments as follows:

The Qur’an itself seems to warn against atomism with the opening word ‘and’. When this warning is heeded, and the larger pericope is appreciated, it becomes apparent that in this passage the Quran is using the Crucifixion as one example of Israelite infidelity. In this passage the Quran provides six examples in all: worshipping the golden calf (Q4.153), breaking the covenant (Q4.155; cf. 5.13), disbelieving the signs of God (4.155; cf. 3.4), murdering the prophets (! Q4.155; cf. 3.181), slandering Mary (Q4.156; cf.19.27-8), and claiming to have killed Jesus (Q.4.157). In other words, in the verse on the crucifixion the Quran intends to defend Jesus from the claims of the Jews, as it defends Mary from their claims in the previous verse.⁶⁹

Thus reading the ‘crucifixion verse’ in its context allows it to be seen in a different light.

Reynolds takes the argument still further in his conclusion to the paper quoted above:

If tafsir (exegesis) indeed provides an accurate explanation of the Quran’s original, intended, meaning, then nowhere should the explanation be clearer than in the case of the Crucifixion. If the Prophet Muhammad announced to his companions that Jesus never died, but rather that someone who was made miraculously to look like him died in his place, i.e., if he gave a historical account of the crucifixion which fundamentally contradicts that which Jews and Christians had been reporting for hundreds of years, then certainly such a revolutionary account – if any – would be well remembered and well preserved. But quite to the contrary, the reports of the mufassirun are inconsistent and often contradictory. They have all the signs of speculative exegesis.⁷⁰

Here the crucifixion verse is looked at in its broader context, and from this perspective it becomes

⁶⁵ Fully explored in Lawson, *op. cit.*

⁶⁶ Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?*, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, 72.2 (2009), 237-258, p. 251/2.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

⁶⁸ Lawson, *op.cit.*, p. 25.

⁶⁹ Reynolds, *op.cit.* p. 251/2.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

possible to see that there is no intention to deny the crucifixion *per se*, although ambiguity remains.

We now return again to Hassan and *Chimes of Church Bells*, where he gives yet another reason for not denying the historicity of the crucifixion, this time based on a comprehensive analysis of the whole gospel narrative of Jesus' life, which throws light on the passion narratives at the end of the Gospels.

6.2.3 Substitution theory and the nature of God

Hassan describes the issue as follows: 'It is necessary' he says, 'to question whether divine nature is such that when endangered it would, as it were, "substitute" one person for another without anyone noticing.'⁷¹ He continues:

Was it really in Christ's nature to allow another person (even Judas Iscariot), to be handed over in his place and to suffer the pain and anguish of the cross – suffering which Jesus had given rise to, in spite of himself, through his teachings and way of life? Does such a flight from danger or the handing over of someone else to be killed in your place appear worthy of God's work... The simple, Christian answer to this question is that Jesus would do nothing other than to suffer pain and torment, even to death. The Muslim explanation of the crucifixion, and as a consequence, of the resurrection, actually contradicts the portrayal of Christ in the Gospels.⁷²

Perhaps such a God is not so difficult for Muslims to understand. Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, for instance, has vividly described how God is conceived in Islam. The essence of Islam is submission to God's will, but that will may be unpredictable, and is certainly not to be questioned by mere humans. The Christian knows that 'God is love' (1 Jn. 4:8) who can be intimately known and trusted through the mediatorship of Jesus Christ, God made man. Jesus shows us what God is like, in other words. On this issue Cragg says the following: 'The Jesus of the Gospels is indiscernible in the shadowy figure who is made to quit the path of his own teaching and his own islam, or 'surrender', to the redeeming purpose of God. Truly here at the Muslim Cross we must say: 'They know not what they do' – as true of philosophical rescuers as of Roman soldiers.'⁷³ 'What we are witnessing in the Qur'anic account', says Cragg, is a "*deus-ex-machina*" God: a God who turns the tables, opens the trapdoor, and confounds all foes, not in the sure, if slow processes of a moral order where love

⁷¹ *Chimes of Church Bells*, p. 19.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Minaret* p. 268.

wins by suffering, but in the arbitrary assertion of the inscrutable.’⁷⁴ And yet he makes the same point as was made about the Incarnation, that is; ‘the Muslim rewriting of the crucifixion story is thought to be in the interests of God’s glory.’⁷⁵ Hassan says, perhaps more gently in his pastoral situation:

The motivation for Islam’s rewriting of the truth of the crucifixion was undoubtedly a sense of the greatness, wonder and power of God. The almighty God cannot simply hold his hands up and allow the Jewish population to crucify his guiltless and sinless servant without intervening to save him. What is divine nature like? What is the essential quality of greatness and glory? Christians have to realise with empathy that the Islamic portrayal of the crucifixion bypasses many profound issues. The duty of Christians is to bear witness, not to convince others of their opinions.⁷⁶

What Hassan is saying here is that a study of the Gospels in their totality would make it clearer that Jesus would not refuse the ultimate sacrifice of his life. It would be against his character, as revealed in the Gospels, to allow someone else to suffer in his place. Moreover, study of the Gospels is able to demonstrate that Jesus knew all through his life that an ignominious end awaited him, and was careful to prepare his disciples for this eventuality lest they lose faith in him, (which despite all this, most of them did, at least for a while).

6.2.4 The crucifixion in the life of Christians

Finally Cragg, revealing his own strong Christian faith, takes the matter away from polemics to describe the place of the cross in the life of ordinary Christians. He writes that ‘[f]reed to draw by its own force, the Cross remains the magnet of human souls.’⁷⁷ For millions of Christians, the cross is not a focus of debate or polemics, but an experience rather than a doctrine; ‘a place of pardon and peace, of divine mercy in action for human remaking.’⁷⁸ Similarly Hassan has said:

The crucifixion of Christ is an event without parallel, which attracts afflicted souls like a magnet, healing them and granting peace.... When all that can be said about the cross has been said, we should add that the full meaning of the crucifixion of Christ cannot be understood. For some the cross may always appear to be ridiculous or illogical. But for those who believe it brings health and healing.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Chimes*, p. 20. Underlining mine – that phrase is not in Cragg,

⁷⁷ *The Call of the Minaret*, p. 274.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Chimes*, p. 27.

The cross is the commonest and most profound symbol of Christianity, yet as Hassan rightly says, it contains depths of meaning, for human salvation and the salvation of the individual, which are largely not understood, but can be experienced.

7 The Nature of God

The final topic to be discussed here is on the nature of God, and the question of monotheism as understood in Islam and Christianity. The Christian position asserts this monotheism strongly, despite the doctrine of the incarnate Son of God and the Trinity, but it would perhaps of necessity be contested by the 'strict' monotheism of Muslims. It is a difficult, purely theological issue, which cannot be proved in any way scientifically.

7.1 God in Christianity: simple or profound?

Having tackled what is perhaps the most difficult area in Muslim/Christian dialogue - the crucifixion and the divine status of Jesus, Hassan now attempts to explain to Muslims the only slightly less difficult topic of the Trinity. He approaches the matter with great earnestness, very aware of his responsibility as a pastor. He knows he has a very difficult task, comparable to that of Moses when he confronted Pharaoh to request the freedom of his people (Exodus 3:11 & 4:10), and like Moses as presented in the Qur'an, he prays, 'Unknot my tongue that he may understand my words.' (Surah 27 & 28)⁸⁰ It is rather like walking into a minefield, for as Hassan explains:

Christians are often criticised for taking a topic which is clear and simple and shrouding it in mystery and ambiguity, Whilst in monotheistic religions such as Islam, an expression such as 'I witness that there is no God but Allah, and that Muhammad is God's prophet' can be quickly grasped and can lead people to conversion, in Christianity it can appear that there are several barriers to understanding. Why is it necessary to struggle with difficult concepts such as the Holy Trinity and baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?⁸¹

Hassan begins by explaining that Christianity does not deliberately make the essential nature of God seem difficult. 'We have to remember', he says, 'that not every subject can be expressed in a simple and unambiguous way – especially if the subject at hand is the nature of

⁸⁰ *Chimes* p. 29. Cragg begins by quoting the same surah: 'Loose the knot from my tongue that they may understand what I say, for here Muslim susceptibilities are so many and Christian expression so difficult.' (*Minaret* p. 275)

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Almighty God.⁸² Hassan was a lover of Persian poetry, and frequently illustrates a point with some verses that would appeal to his listeners. In this context he quotes Sa'di (presumably so well known that no details apart from his name are necessary to his readers):

O you who are above the imagination, above belief, above comparison and above all that has been said and heard,
The party is over, life is at its end and we still haven't started describing you.⁸³

Even in translation, this beautifully expresses how little we can actually know, still less say, about God in himself. He goes on to emphasise that the complexity of God 'does not mean that simple, uneducated people should be ignorant of the presence of God. On the contrary, the simple faith of an everyday person draws him or her closer to God than does the knowledge of the hardened theologian.'⁸⁴ Even some fathers of the church, continues Hassan, 'fail to arrive at the waters of eternal life, but become drowned instead in a whirlpool of theories.'⁸⁵

Cragg, in his parallel treatment of this point, manages to inject a touch of humour. Some 'wit' had it, he says, that one might as well say, "The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, the Holy Ghost Incomprehensible, the whole idea incomprehensible", making crude havoc of the Latin meaning.'⁸⁶ That the Christian faith 'collapses under its own intricacy' is a view he has found expressed in much contemporary Muslim literature.⁸⁷ Moreover he makes the claim that 'Western converts to Islam explain their decision in such terms'.⁸⁸ Cragg goes on to quote the boast of a certain Muhammad 'Ali, who in his biography declared that for Islam 'a postage stamp would suffice, as far as theology is concerned; "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Apostle" is the dogma of Islam, and it makes no call on its believers' powers of thinking or their credulity.'⁸⁹ However, 'even a little reflection', counters Cragg, 'surely makes it clear that doctrines

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* p. 30

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Minaret* p. 277. See the Athanasian Creed for the correct rendering.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* He gives as an example 'the traveller, H.St.John Philby.'

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

of God are not commendable merely by their ability to fit on a postage stamp.’⁹⁰ Finally, on this issue, he returns to his missionary task: ‘Our Christian task in this realm’, he says ‘is patiently to dissipate the erroneous notion that Christian theology is a piece of dispensable subtlety encumbering the simplicity of true theism. Muslims need to be awakened to the profundity of their own simplicities and the relevance of what they consider Christian extravagancies.’⁹¹ There is a real challenge issued to Muslims in these words, which is less marked in Hassan who tries to gently explain, though obviously having read what Cragg had written above. He explains:

Phrases such as ‘God is great’, or ‘God is love’ are succinct, simple and clear – because they are expressed in language which is straightforward, rather than lofty or complicated. However the meaning of these phrases is so profound that the greatest thinkers in the world could spend their lives pondering on them. If we favour only that which is short and simple and fear depth of reflection we are denying our intelligence and ability to think – both of which are blessings from God.⁹²

To emphasise the point Hassan draws again on Persian poetry, this time Rumi’s First Book of Masnavi:

Whatever I say about Love, in regard to description and
Explanation, when I reach Love itself, I am ashamed of that
Inadequate description...
The pen was busy writing descriptions, but when it
Reached Love, it shattered against itself.⁹³

That ‘God is Love’ is a fundamental tenet of Christianity. It is to be noted here that Hassan finds a parallel in the mystic Rumi.

7.2 The Trinity

This question of the ‘simplicity’ of God leads naturally to a discussion of the Trinity, which both Hassan and Cragg insist is not a denial of the oneness of God. Hassan is keen to emphasise that ‘the words which we use to describe God are necessarily inadequate and this is also true of the word Trinity...’ and so, he says, ‘We rely on our Muslim friends to accept that our belief concerning the nature of God does not call into dispute the oneness of God but is instead a kind of attempt at

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 278.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Chimes*, p. 30.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

explaining this oneness.⁹⁴ He insists that both Muslims and Christians share the belief in one God alone – a conviction inherited from our Jewish ancestors: ‘Hear, O Israel, Yahweh, our God, is one’ (Deuteronomy 6:4). In an almost word for word imitation of Cragg, Hassan says: ‘People who refer to three gods are not talking about Christianity. The difference between the beliefs of Muslims and those of Christians is how we each perceive and understand the oneness of God – anything outside of this realm is not Christianity.’⁹⁵

Cragg, as with the simplicity of God, approaches the issue in a way which is more challenging to Muslims. He begins, as did Hassan, in rooting both Christian and Islamic belief in the Hebrew Scriptures, and quoting the same text (Dt.6:4) before going on to make a point about the spirit in which this dialogue between our two religions should be conducted. ‘It is un-Islamic and un-Christian’, he declares, ‘as long as it is querulous, assertive, or doctrinaire. We are not concerned to bring cases to victory, but minds to meeting.’⁹⁶

Hassan does not say this. The difficulty of giving any kind of explanation is admitted by Cragg, but, he says, ‘We must banish the suspicion that a conspiracy of silence would serve peace better.’⁹⁷ However the ‘explanations’, which follow, lengthy though they be, are not particularly illuminating. If this is the case even for a Christian, one has to question how much illumination Cragg expects a Muslim to obtain from his ‘explanations’. It is probably a wearisome task for both men to try to explain to Muslims that Christians are already converted to the monotheism they would wish them to adopt; it happened in fact long before the Qur’an came into being. The challenge, more implied than stated, is that Muslims might be able to put their ardent monotheism into context if critical studies of the Quranic text were more advanced which, because of the way the reception of the Qur’an is conceived, may take some time.⁹⁸

Indeed the fundamental protest made by Muhammad against Meccan idolatry was implicit

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31/32.

⁹⁶ *Minaret*, p. 279.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

⁹⁸ This important question has been addressed in Ch.6 of thesis under *Revelation*

in the whole ethos of the Hebrew and Christian tradition. Muhammad's iconoclasm was desperately valid and necessary in the Arabian context. It had no validity, however, as a disallowance of Christian dogma, because that dogma could in no valid way be identified with paganism. The fact was that the Christian community had made the same revolt as Muhammad in its own ancestry and context centuries before Muhammad made it in Arabia.⁹⁹

In the last analysis 'faith in the Trinity', says Hassan, 'reaches the highest levels of mystery',¹⁰⁰ and all we can do in the face of Muslim incomprehension is to say that it is equally incomprehensible to Christians, but it is a revealed truth that we accept in faith. In the face of this both men revert to witness: it is a reality that can only be experienced. As Cragg says, 'The genesis in experience cannot be too strongly emphasised.'¹⁰¹ 'It is profoundly significant', he continues, 'that the sweetest and perhaps the earliest statement of this Christian faith places it in the context of experience where theology ends, as it should, in doxology: 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. '(2 Cor.13:14) For through Christ we all have access by one Spirit unto the Father (Eph.2:18).'¹⁰²

Finally, says Hassan, 'whilst it is incorrect to think that any belief is valid because it is mysterious, a mystery which enlightens the ignorant mind, gladdens the miserable heart, and sheds hope where there is no hope, should not be rejected hastily.'¹⁰³ The Trinity will ever be a stumbling block in any conversation with Muslims, but the point will always be made by Christians that they are monotheists, and never have held a doctrine of 'three gods.'

7.3 The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is probably an even greater puzzle to Muslims than the Father and the Son: Hassan explains his role in the life of the first disciples of Jesus as follows:

Jesus' first disciples were for the most part simple people who had no special status within society. After Christ's crucifixion they were beside themselves with fright and so scattered

⁹⁹ *Minaret* p. 280.

¹⁰⁰ *Chimes* p. 39.

¹⁰¹ *Minaret* p. 285.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Chimes of Church Bells* p. 39.

and went into hiding. For them the coming of the Holy Spirit was like a warm, silent wind which blew around them, transforming the dead garden of their hearts, stirring the leaves and branches of the trees and bringing life to their immobility. The disciples were overcome with a surprising yearning which they felt within them and which prompted them to leave their hiding places, enter society and start to preach. The Gospel describes how the disciples 'were filled with the Holy Spirit' and were certain that their Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, had risen from the dead. Fear no longer had any meaning for them for they knew that a power greater than themselves was moving within them and moving them to act. They knew this stirring was not of their own initiative... it was this spirit that strengthened their belief and urged them to bear witness to Christ's resurrection and its implications for humanity.¹⁰⁴

It is arguable, though highly unlikely, that these first shattered disciples could, after the ignominious death of their teacher and master, have picked themselves up to begin spreading the Gospel, without the assistance of this mysterious 'Holy Spirit'. The Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit is complex and not to be delved into further except as Hassan has frequently said: these 'doctrines' are to be experienced before they are 'understood.'

8 Conclusion

It is clear from the above comparison of Hassan's book, *Chimes of Church Bells*, with Cragg's *The Call of the Minaret*, just how close the two men were in their approach to Islam. There is also ample evidence that this intellectual/ missionary affinity was enhanced by a deep personal friendship which must have been very supportive to Hassan in the years after he first came under Cragg's influence. The Anglican Church in Iran was to go through a torrid time in the wake of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and also in the years leading up to it, as has been described above (See Ch.4 of thesis). Hassan was a wonderful pastor and church leader, but the events of those years would have tested the strongest of men. To have to leave behind 'a shattered community, wounded and deeply troubled',¹⁰⁵ and see all he had so painstakingly built up taken away without reverting to a 'pre-Craggian' attitude to Islam infused with a painful bitterness, was a considerable achievement.

Cragg's influence continued in the years of Hassan's exile in England as, for instance, when he would attend the twice yearly meeting of the FDI (Friends of the Diocese of Iran) to give support to the exiles and their many friends. On one occasion (August 1998) during a homily at the

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* p. 36/7.

¹⁰⁵ 'By their fruits shall you know them', in *A faithful Presence*, *op.cit.* p. 57.

concluding Eucharist, Cragg said the following words which neatly summarise both Hassan's and his own attitude towards an Islam both have struggled, with laudable success, not to demonise, but rather to continue to regard with a generous, open-hearted attitude for, he said:

Chanting mobs and turbulent people-power are only half the story. One always has to be pondering Islam via the exquisite beauty of the Lutfullah mosque in the Maidan of Isfahan...This sublime measure of things must always counter-balance the dark face of Islam in history... and not least recent history in our context.¹⁰⁶

Almost twenty years later, despite some improvement in Muslim/Christian relations, there is still no lack of violent incidents around the world associated with a militant version of Islam, and the temptation is to think we have achieved nothing. However, for the moment it is to be noted that external success is not everything; the spirit of the Iranian church is still alive and may well revive when circumstances become more favourable.

The next chapter takes up and develops further suggestions and challenges in the writings of both Hassan and Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil of how a deeper understanding of the Qur'an can be obtained, ultimately with the aim of improving Muslim/Christian relations.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

CHAPTER 8

LOOKING FORWARD

1 Introduction

This chapter will address the concerns of Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil and Hassan Dehqani Tafti about the future of Muslim/Christian relations. Both men have expended considerable effort in helping Christians to understand Islam, and in the case of Hassan, Muslims to understand Christianity, and both have highlighted the considerable difficulties involved, as described in the previous two chapters of thesis. However, they have also suggested ways forward which will be outlined below, and the rest of the chapter will be an attempt to show how the issues they have highlighted are going forward today through the work of various individuals and initiatives.

2 The Challenge

Jean-Mohammed, in a rare burst of impatience with his former Muslim co-religionists says, in the context of Islam's relation with other faiths: 'In our age scientific objectivity, the impartiality of historic enquiry, and a serious effort on both sides [Muslim and Christian] with a view to a more correct understanding, would surely contribute towards a just, generous world, so hoped for.'¹ Jean-Mohammed also indicated somewhat later in his career, in *Aspects intérieurs de L'Islam*, written between 1939 and 1947, that he would like to see Muslims study Christian history, especially of the Church and its doctrines, of which they have little understanding, as has been discussed in the previous chapter, especially in the context of the very complex Christological doctrines of the first four centuries of Christianity. This would help Muslims to appreciate that Christians are well aware of the struggles of this time, but that they in no way differ (except in content) from the struggles of early Islam.² Concerning the Gospel, generally not accepted to be 'genuine' by Muslims, Jean-Mohammed says the following: 'The Gospel we now read is authentic, and becomes ever more certain through the work of serious scholars, and beyond all the hypotheses and opinions that have

¹ *L'Islam et Nous*, p. 55. This was first written in 1935, shortly after his ordination to the priesthood and at the beginning of his career as an academic at the *Institut Catholique*.

² See in particular, *Aspects*, pp. 197-200.

been proposed to explain or annihilate it.’³

The Qur’an has been studied very seriously by Christian scholars, many of whom have learned Arabic to better understand the text, for instance Maurice Borrmans M.Afr., Gabriel Said Reynolds, Jane Dammen McAuliffe, who in addition to editing *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an* has published her own translation of the Qur’an.⁴ Jean-Mohammed seems to be calling for some reciprocity in this area, with an unspoken assumption that it would benefit mutual understanding if Muslims were to study the Gospels in a similar spirit of serious enquiry and openness. There do not in fact seem to be any Muslim scholars who have studied the Gospels seriously. An exception may be Reza Aslan (1972-), an Iranian American religious studies scholar who has written a book entitled *Zealot: The Life of Jesus of Nazareth*, but it is not taken seriously by scholars.⁵ As Maurice Borrmans has said: ‘We still deplore the great rarity of publications by Muslims on Christianity.’⁶

It would seem, then, that study of the Church (ecclesiology), which involves the study of history, and the Scriptures, particularly the New Testament, are the areas where serious research is needed by Muslims in order to promote a deeper Christian/Muslim understanding. The first area, the Church, which includes some understanding of the development of doctrine as understood in Christianity, is particularly difficult because there is, seemingly, nothing comparable in Islam. However, many Christians (and others) have studied Islam and the Qur’an very seriously in all its aspects, evidenced by the fact that the study of Islam, however minimally, is an accepted discipline in most Western universities, Christian universities not excepted. A good example is the University of Exeter where there is a large Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies. There is also an Institute in Rome dedicated exclusively to the study of Arabic and Islam (The Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islam). Islamic Studies is now a recognised and well-established area of study and

³ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

⁴ *The Qur’an*, Edited by Jane McAuliffe, Norton Critical Editions, Norton & Company, New York, 2017. This list is by no means exhaustive. See also, for example, *Christian Lives Given to the Study of Islam*, Edited by Christian Troll SJ and C.T.R. Hewer, Fordham University Press, New York, 2012 where brief biographies of 28 modern Islamic scholars are given.

⁵ See website *Reza Aslan*, accessed 26.9.17. I am grateful to Gabriel Said Reynolds for suggesting this example.

⁶ *Conversations et Meditations* in the bulletin, *Association des Amis de Louis Massignon*, no.22, Dec. 2009.

research throughout the Western academic world. But it cannot be said that Islamic institutions, or individual scholars, study Christianity in the same way (though there may be exceptions, such as the Seminary dedicated to the Ayatollah Khomeini in Qum, Iran). However, as François Jourdan has remarked: ‘There is no “christianology” in Islam: we don’t know of any Muslim specialists in the Bible and the New Testament. Some Muslims might be able to offer a biblical quotation at a conference, but this does not imply any frequent or long term study.’⁷ In a similar vein, but more promising for the future, a Muslim woman theologian, Mona Siddiqui (1963-) writes:

For me [dialogue] has always been about learning, my desire to know more about Christian theology, and through this to be challenged in my own Muslim faith. As a Muslim woman, often a lone voice in what is still a largely male-dominated academic field, I have always felt an ethical imperative to stay involved. This interest has also been reinforced by the knowledge that there are still very few Muslims throughout the world who have a theological interest in Christianity.⁸

Hassan has likewise made a plea for scientific research methods in the search for greater understanding between Muslims and Christians. Speaking on the subject of *tahrif*, the Muslim belief that Christians have distorted their Scriptures, he comments:

The hope is that over time the path to greater understanding will be opened by way of a growing respect for scientific research methods and the study and comparison of historical texts. This process can be assisted greatly by such subjects as archaeology, anthropology and sociology, as well as the analysis of the relationship between language and intellect.⁹

However, he continues, although these areas of study have ‘advanced dramatically’ in the West, it has sometimes had a counterproductive effect on Muslims. As he explains:

Even though in essence the texts of the Bible have not been changed, research carried out by experts into the age of the texts, the identity of the writers and some other details, has reached different conclusions. As yet Islamic researchers have not carried out research in Greek and Hebrew – the original languages of the Bible – into the age and sources of various Biblical texts. However, they are familiar with the results of professors in the West and the differences in their respective theories and commentaries. For this reason many Muslims have come to the conclusion that Christians themselves are less convinced about the

⁷ François Jourdan, *Dieu des chrétiens, Dieu des musulmans*, Préface de Rémi Brague, pub. Champs essais, Editions de l’Oeuvre 2008. This edition Flammarion 2012 (no place of publication is given), p. 32.

⁸ Mona Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims & Jesus*, Yale University Press, London 2013, *Introduction*, p. 1. Siddiqui is Professor of Islamic and Interreligious Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Despite her interest in Christian theology, however, most of her written work seems to be to promote understanding of Islam, for instance *How to read the Qur’an*, Granta Books, 2007, and *Islam* in four volumes. She founded the Centre for the Study of Islam at Glasgow University and her PhD was a study of classical Islamic law.

⁹ *Chimes of Church Bells*, p. 9.

reliability of the Bible than Muslims are about the Qur'an. It is clear that until Islamists begin to recognise the value of using scientific research methods to investigate the origin of texts of holy books such as the Qur'an, this viewpoint will not change.¹⁰

From the very beginnings of Islam, Muslims have, unfortunately, been discouraged from reading the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, let alone using scientific research methods to investigate their origin etc. This is largely due to the concept of abrogation whereby all Scriptures which precede the Qur'an have no relevance, are superseded, or corrected, by the Qur'an.¹¹ To repeat what Hassan has said forcefully:

The Islamic viewpoint is that since the Qur'an is the product of divine memory and heavenly inspiration, it is not for mankind to question its source and origin, to ask 'hows' and 'whys' regarding its contents or try to understand it through scientific research and historical criticism. It is for this reason that the theory of distortion came to be.¹²

He goes on to describe the notion of *tahrif* as 'absurd'; that is, the idea that Christians should deliberately change their own holy books well before the advent of Islam. This is Hassan, a very gentle character, at his most forthright. A touch of sheer impatience with his fellow Muslims may be detected here; also sadness, as the Bible is full of riches which are inaccessible to Muslims with this attitude which he obviously saw as normative in his time.

Today it would appear that the aforementioned attitude is beginning to change, at which both Hassan and Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil would have greatly rejoiced. Also the text of the Qur'an is beginning to be examined as a historical document, not just a holy text. My own research during the thesis has led me to the conclusion that the concept of revelation, that is, how differently it is understood in Islam and Christianity, arguably creates the largest barrier to mutual understanding. Therefore I have discussed this issue at length earlier in the thesis.¹³

An appreciation of how much of Christianity is in the Qur'an would help mutual understanding. 'It is a matter of common knowledge', says Yohanan Friedman, referring to

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 9.

¹¹ Yohanan Friedman has discussed this issue in depth. See *op.cit.*, Ch.1, 'Religious diversity and hierarchy of religions', pp. 14-53.

¹² *Chimes of Church Bells*, p. 9

¹³ See Ch..6, 3.6.

academic studies, 'that Islam incorporated abundant material from the Judaeo-Christian tradition.'¹⁴ Hopefully what is studied among academics will in time bear fruit among all Muslims (and Christians). In a recently published book, *The Qur'an and the Bible*, the many resonances of the Bible and other Christian literature, e.g. Syriac, to be found in the Qur'an, have been spelled out and commented on in some detail.¹⁵ It has also been suggested, in the Introduction, the possibly novel idea (to the ordinary Muslim and Christian) that there could be multiple authors of the Qur'an. Alternatively, as it seems to be generally accepted that the Qur'an was revealed at different times according to need, there could still be only one author despite the diversity of materials therein.¹⁶ According to the author:

There is simply no compelling academic reason (theological reasons are of course another story) to refuse categorically the possibility that the Qur'an has multiple authors/and editors... what is at stake in academic research on the Qur'an is not whether or not the Qur'an is revealed – a question which surpasses the domain of the historian – but instead how it can best be understood.¹⁷

Reynolds goes on to say that the main argument of his book is that 'the Qur'an itself, by referring regularly to Jewish and Christian traditions, demands that its audience know those traditions.'¹⁸

Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil would undoubtedly have been open to all these suggestions, but he is very guarded in his comments. In *L'Islam et Nous*, for instance, he tells us, without elaboration, that there were to begin with several readings of the Qur'an but, at least in his time, this was not generally accepted because 'modern critics do not believe there is sufficient reason to doubt the 'received text', that is, received by the Prophet who was understood to be a totally passive instrument.¹⁹ A Christian, by attempting to bracket his or her faith, and enter into the spirit of what this Book means to Muslims, may find it easier to understand how difficult it is for them (at least those who are not scholars) to give up this idea. It is equally difficult for most Christians familiar

¹⁴ Friedman, *op.cit.*, p. 19.

¹⁵ Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an and the Bible: Text and commentary*, (Qur'an translated by Ali Quli Qarai), Yale University Press, 2018. .

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁹ *L'Islam et Nous*, *op.cit.* p. 34.

with the Bible to read the Qur'an as Muslims read it. Some have succeeded, such as Christian de Chergé.²⁰ Nevertheless it is something that should be done with respect, in the interests of mutual understanding and friendship. It can seem to the Christian that the Qur'an has no context – it is not, apparently, grounded in earthly reality and events like the Bible, and seems to make conflicting pronouncements. However, it must be admitted that this latter trait is also characteristic of the Bible. As the Qur'an and its biblical subtext becomes better known, this might become an easier task for Christians and Muslims alike. In the study of religion from a scientific perspective, the 'certainties' of faith have to be put aside, at least temporarily. It is important to be able to 'bracket' one's faith to be able to examine a text as objectively as possible. This will enable all the tools of modern biblical research to yield the deeper meanings of a text, which should in no way lessen the faith of the researcher; rather it may be enriched and strengthened.

Hassan has discussed the difficulty of translating the Qur'an; when he was writing the concept was still a new one. Likewise still alive was the belief that it should not be translated into languages of 'non-Islamic' countries. He points out that a similar attitude existed with regard to the Bible, but 'the protestant movement put an end to this exclusivism and finally the Bible was translated into the languages of ordinary people.'²¹ These new translations are necessary not only once but many times, for, claims Hassan:

With many sociologists arguing that since the language of any particular society is constantly adapting as the society itself changes, each new generation – and even different groups within the same generation – require fresh translations. Many Muslims struggle to understand the necessity of having many different translations of a holy book, especially when lexical variations result, and they remain vehement about the issue of distortion in the Bible.²²

This is indeed a very difficult situation. The issue of the distortion of the Bible, about which Hassan claims Muslims of his time to be 'vehement', is not a doctrinal/theological issue from the Christian perspective that needs to be defended. It is simply a matter of examining the texts, as described by Hassan above, and accepting the results. In conclusion, speaking of the way ahead, he says, 'It is,

²⁰ See my *Methodology*, Ch.2 of thesis, for further comments on this case.

²¹ *Chimes of Church Bells*, p. 9.

²² *Ibid.*

undoubtedly, a long and winding road and we can only walk it with patience and compassion.'²³

The rest of this chapter will explore some aspects of this way ahead that have already been achieved, and are pointing forward to further developments, especially in the area of Qur'anic Studies. The next section is especially concerned with the crucifixion, not its deeper significance for redemption, but the simple fact of whether or not it happened. Because of its importance it has been discussed at length in Ch.7 of thesis. The following is a study from a Muslim perspective which would surely have given much encouragement to both Hassan and Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil.

3 Reading the Qur'an in the twenty first century

Both converts would have been encouraged to know that there is much ongoing research today on the text of the Quran, but it is mainly among specialists, that is, serious researchers including those who have special skills which can be applied to the Qur'an, e.g. linguistic skills such as ancient Arabic and Syriac. Such research is not easily accessible (at least at present), to non-specialists, for instance religious leaders who do not engage in this type of study. It is not the intention here to document all of this, but just to give an indication of what is happening today.

Abdullah Saeed, Sultan of Oman Professor of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Melbourne, Australia, has written a book entitled *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century: a Contextualist Approach*.²⁴ His work is of particular interest because it is a fairly rare incidence of a Muslim scholar applying certain principles to the Qur'an which allow it to be interpreted in the contemporary context, that is, the modern world and its demands which can be very different from those of the seventh century CE where it had its origin. It is a book intended for his fellow Muslims, but I would suggest is of great interest to Christians also. After outlining the principles involved in this approach, the author applies it in detail to four cases; men's authority over women, the crucifixion and death of Jesus, democracy, and the question of interest on money borrowed.²⁵ After outlining what Saeed says about these basic principles, I intend to concentrate on just one of these

²³ *Ibid.* p. 9.

²⁴ Pub. Routledge, Abingdon, 2014. See also Ch.6 of thesis, section 3.6. *Revelation*

²⁵ See Part III, *Different interpretations for different contexts: Four cases*, pp. 109-160.

cases, that is, the crucifixion and death of Jesus, as it complements what has been written in the previous chapter using Hassan's own writing, corroborated by that of Todd Lawson and Gabriel Said Reynolds.²⁶ It will be seen that what Saeed has written is very much in agreement with these three, but has the added value of coming from a Muslim perspective using the contextualist approach which traces the development of Muslim views on the crucifixion, and how the context explains to some degree the nature of these views. Before embarking on this, however, the general principles of the approach will be outlined.

3.1 Principles of the contextualist approach

The key idea underlying this approach is that while 'due recognition [is given] to earlier approaches to interpretation', it is important also to be 'aware of changing circumstances and social, political and cultural conditions' that change through the ages.²⁷ The Qur'an is a source of 'practical guidelines', which should be implemented in new ways whenever circumstances warrant them, so long as these do not impinge on the fundamentals of Islam.²⁸

There are two ways of looking at the context. The first of these is through language (the linguistic context), which examines 'the way a particular phrase, sentence or short text is situated within a larger text'.²⁹ The second way concerns an examination of the 'macro-context' of a particular word, phrase or passage. This approach:

refers to the social, political, economic, cultural and intellectual settings of the Qur'anic text under consideration. The macro context considers also the place in which the revelation occurred and the people to whom it was addressed. In addition it includes the ideas, assumptions, values, beliefs, religious customs, and cultural norms that existed at the time.³⁰

The purpose of this is to try and understand what the text meant to the people who lived in a particular set of circumstances which may have been very different from the modern context. The

²⁶ See Ch.6, section 6 of thesis, where this issue is discussed in detail, drawing on what Hassan has written in *Chimes of Church Bells*. Todd's major work *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an* is also discussed, and a journal article by Reynolds, *The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?*. Both these works are in general agreement with what Hassan has outlined in his own work.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Ch.1, *Introduction and modern emphases in Qur'anic interpretation*, pp. 1-38, here at p. 4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

former is 'macro-context 1', and the latter 'macro-context 2'. However equally important is to take into consideration the intervening ages and how the Qur'an was interpreted then. This is the 'connector-context' which concerns:

the ideas, scholarship, and interpretations that have continuously adapted the Qur'an to emerging contexts. Without the connector context it would not be possible to link macro context 1 and macro context 2. The intermediary role of the connector context demonstrates how successive generations of Muslims have applied the Qur'anic text and its norms to their lives. With this framework, it is possible to read the Qur'an in a way that emphasises its ongoing relevance to society in the present and to the generations that will follow.³¹

It is important in this approach to the Qur'an that the 'fundamentals' of Islam are not compromised in any way. 'A principled approach', says Saeed, does not do this, and in fact, he continues, 'there are enough safeguards in the approach to avoid it being categorised as relativism.'³² These fundamentals are the obligatory values, that is, the six pillars of faith, and those things considered immutable, such as 'basic belief in one God, prophets, scripture and life after death'.³³ Another important principle to be born in mind is that of reflexivity, that is to say:

Each interpreter always brings into interpretation his or her own experiences, ideas, beliefs, values and presuppositions, and these will have a significant influence on the interpretation. Awareness of this frees the interpreter from needing to make claims to finality, as a personal perspective will always be inherent in any interpretation.³⁴

Saeed also makes the point that this contextualist method has been used in the Qur'an from its earliest history. An important example is described below.

3.2 An early form of contextualisation: Umar

Umar b. al-Khattah (d23/644) was one of the earliest followers of the Prophet. However the history of these early days of Islam is far from clear. As Saeed explains:

Given the level of fabrication of hadith that occurred in the first and second centuries of Islam, and the difficulties associated with the biographical material collated by Muslims in relation to the Prophet, the question of the authenticity of such material remains an important question in contemporary Islamic scholarship.³⁵

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³² *Ibid.*, Ch.9 'Fundamentals of the religion' and interpretation, pp. 90-93, here at p. 90.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 94, 96.

³⁵ *Ibid.* Ch.3, *An early form of contextualism: Umar and interpretation*, pp. 26-37, here at p. 26.

While all the sources may not be completely reliable, by tradition Umar played a very important part in the young Muslim community, and as 'a senior Companion of the Prophet, his counsel was often sought on important issues, and his view carried weight with the Prophet'.³⁶

Despite uncertainty about the reliability of the hadith, Saeed believes:

[This literature] can safely be assumed to have been the kinds of views that Muslims at the time were comfortable with in attributing to a figure like Umar. Even if these opinions were not historically fully reliable, the views expressed in the texts that were seen as acceptable or legitimate in the early Islamic tradition are worthy of exploration in our attempts to justify a contextualist reading of the Qur'an.³⁷

There follow some significant examples of Umar's adaptations of the Prophet's instructions to the early Islamic community. The first concerns the implementation of punishments for social crimes. At the time of the 'Year of Drought' in Medina, so called because there was a famine, Umar 'suspended the Qur'anic penalty for theft', which was 'amputation of the hand', because, he argued, 'some people might be forced to steal out of hunger.'³⁸

A second example concerns the matter of Muslims marrying Jewish and Christian women. They were at the time living among non-Muslims who were mainly Christians, and although such marriages are permitted by the Qur'an (Q5.5), Umar forbade this practice because he 'felt that permitting Muslims to marry non-Muslim women could lead to the dilution of the identity of the Muslim community',³⁹ which in those early days he judged it was important to consolidate.

The third example concerns worship. 'Muslims in general', says Saeed, 'believe that matters of ritual cannot be changed at all by anyone but God and the Prophet', but despite this strong belief, after the Prophet's death, Umar 'reintroduced the long, nightly prayers... during the fasting month of Ramadan'.⁴⁰ The Prophet himself had actually discouraged these prayers; he performed them himself but did not wish others to join him 'lest the Muslims might take it to be an obligation'.⁴¹

These prayers are still performed today in the night by fervent Muslims, following an arduous day's

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

fasting during Ramadan.

Umar, Saeed believes, sets an example of contextualisation that can be imitated today. This method will now be examined in more detail in the case of the crucifixion of Jesus. In this, as has been discussed in the previous chapter, there is a long tradition among Muslims that the crucifixion did not happen, at least to Jesus, based on one verse in the Qur'an, Q4.157.

3.3 The Crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ

Saeed examines this crucifixion verse in detail, and concludes, for the same reasons as those described in the previous chapter, (which depend very much on a thorough knowledge of the Arabic language), that in fact the Qur'an is not saying that Jesus did not die, but only that the Jews did not kill him.⁴² The arguments used to arrive at that position will not be repeated here. Rather the particular contribution of the contextualist approach to the Qur'an as described by Saeed will be explored.

As has already been said in the previous chapter, the historicity of the crucifixion has never been questioned within mainstream Christianity, but from the Muslim perspective it 'has been a key "theological" issue that [they] have been debating from the first century of Islam'.⁴³ Why should that be? The contextualist approach throws light on this question, and may help to change the Muslim perspective of a very divisive issue. As has already been explained, the dominant position throughout Muslim history can be described as follows: 'The macro-context of the pre-modern society favoured ideas such as the miraculous saving of a prophet from death, substitution of someone else for him, or raising him in body and spirit to the heavens.'⁴⁴ This long standing conviction that prophets must always be vindicated, because it was the case that it happened to all those whose careers are described in the Qur'an, may not be so firmly held today. In fact there is no logical reason why this should always be the case, for 'in the modern period, within a scientific world view that is influenced by ideas such as reason and critical examination of theological positions, it is

⁴² *Ibid.*, Ch.12, *Crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ*, pp. 129-147, see especially p. 130-140.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

possible to rethink such positions.’⁴⁵

Another reason which may account for the remarkable consistency in the Muslim approach to the crucifixion, is the fact that Jesus’ whole life as described in the Qur’an has a miraculous quality about it which sets him apart from other men, even other prophets, Muhammad not excepted, which would seem to suggest his death should also be surrounded by the miraculous. Saeed argues:

For Muslims, the miraculous nature of Jesus himself – his conception, his birth, his growing up, and then his ministry – all occurred within a miraculous frame of reference. Thus, his end should also occur within this context. Given that the conception of Jesus probably came to dominate the thinking in the 2nd and 3rd centuries of Islam, and that Muslim theology had accepted this conception of Jesus, it was very easy for that theological position then to dominate the thinking of Muslim commentators in relation to the Qur’anic texts. That theological position therefore came to provide a decisive framework for interpretation of this very ambiguous Qur’anic verse. [Q4.157]⁴⁶

The next section will look at the interpretation of this verse in ‘modern’ times, that is, before the present time and contextualisation, where it will be seen that until recently there has been very little, if any, change in a certain fixity in the Muslim position.

3.3.1 Interpretation in the Modern Period

It is evident that the early Muslim conception of Jesus still remains a powerful frame of reference even in the modern period; examples of scholars who espouse the traditional view include Abdul la Maududi, Rashid Rida, and Sayyid Qutb, all of whom continue to deny the crucifixion of Jesus. On this situation Saeed comments:

This denial is largely based on certain reports that were transmitted by second-generation Muslims and are not necessarily based on any particular tradition of the Prophet that is considered ‘authentic’....their view is based very much on a literal reading of the text, and relies on specific theological positions adopted by early Muslims with regard to Jesus. Virtually all indicate a substitute was crucified.⁴⁷

Qutb, interestingly, believes the Gospel accounts cannot be believed because they were written after a lengthy lapse of time following the events described,⁴⁸ when Christians were being persecuted and living in an atmosphere of fear and secrecy. As such, he believes, ‘it is exceedingly

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 142/3.

⁴⁸ In fact it was between 30 and 60 years. The Gospel of Mark is traditionally believed to be the first to have been put into writing, and is estimated to have taken its final shape about 30 years after the death of Jesus.

difficult to be certain of the truthfulness of the reports that circulated.⁴⁹ It may be noted, however, that in fact the first biography of the Prophet Muhammad was written after a considerably greater lapse of time than the Gospels were after the earthly life of Jesus. The earliest, by Ibn Ishaq, was written over a hundred years after the Prophet had died.⁵⁰

Although refusing to believe the reliability of the early Gospels, of which there were many apart from the four canonical ones of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Qutb has no hesitation in relying on the so-called Gospel of Barnabas 'insofar as it confirmed the Qur'an's position'.⁵¹ And '[he] is not the first modern Muslim scholar to rely on this Gospel to interpret the Qur'anic position on the crucifixion and death of Jesus'. Rashid Rida is the only other example quoted. This is an extraordinary situation as this 'Gospel' is in disagreement with all the others, most especially the four 'official', canonical ones.

Hassan has commented on this situation in his *Chimes of Church Bells* under the heading *The Apocryphal Gospels*.⁵² He begins his exposition on apocryphal Gospels in general by explaining the situation in first century Christianity when believers were spreading far and wide. In this situation, says Hassan, there was 'a pressing need for a written account of Jesus' ministry',⁵³ Apart from the four canonical gospels which the Church formally accepted, there were many others, for example 'the Gospels of Peter, Thomas and Philip, the Acts of John, the Acts of Paul, the Acts of Andrew, the Epistle of Christ'.⁵⁴ Hassan then details what is known of the so-called Gospel of Barnabas, on which he has obviously done a considerable amount of personal research. This work is not very well known in the West but, says Hassan, but '[b]ecause it became famous in the Islamic world, other than being translated into English and French, translations also exist in Arabic, Urdu, Farsi and Indonesian. Researchers and Islamists around the world have not tired of exploring its origin, source,

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 141. This is a summary of Saeed's quote from Qutb's *In the Shade of the Qur'an, tafsir of Q.4.157*

⁵⁰ Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Emergence of Islam: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2012, p. 5.

⁵¹ *Saeed, op.cit.*, p. 141.

⁵² *Chimes of Church Bells*, p. 3-5.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

contents and author.⁵⁵

The research is extensive, which Hassan declares to be beyond the scope of his small book, but he summarises ‘some findings made by literary experts and scientific researchers’.⁵⁶ There follows a brief summary: In his own words:

Until 1743 AD very few people in the Islamic world had heard of the Gospel of Barnabas. The book contains many geographical, historical and literary mistakes. Even the footnotes that have been added in Arabic are inaccurate in places. Scientific and literary testing which have been carried out on the paper, the writing and the contents of the book have proven that a forgery must have taken place during the second part of the 16th century. The author of the book, in all likelihood, was a monk named Fra Marino. Based on sources from that era, Fra Marino achieved a high rank within the Inquisition Court between 1542 and 1550, and due to his position he had access to many censored texts. Later, one of his adversaries, Sixtus V, became Pope and initiated an investigation into Fra Marino and ultimately had him removed from his position in the Inquisition Court. Partly to avenge his opponent, Marino sought assistance from Muslims in the West and compiled the Gospel of Barnabas. In order to cast slander on Sixtus who openly deplored any kind of heresy, Marino secretly planted the book in the Pope’s personal library. Whilst it is likely that Marino was attracted to Islam, he clearly did not know much about it.⁵⁷

According to Hassan’s research, described above, the work is a proven forgery. He says no more than that, so we must take his word for it that proof exists. Hassan is not concerned to produce an academic thesis, but a pastoral document for his congregation who would no doubt be familiar with this Gospel. It would seem, therefore, to be beyond doubt that the Gospel of Barnabas is a spurious work, which has no standing and is barely known in the Christian world. It is unfortunate that reputable Islamic scholars have used it to bolster their conviction that Jesus was not crucified. We now return to Abdullah Saeed’s commentary on the crucifixion of Jesus.

3.3.2 The contextualist approach as applied to Q4.157

Virtually up to the present, therefore, it seems that the traditional Muslim approach has been to deny the crucifixion of Jesus. This is the ‘textualist’ approach which:

relies on a theological position about the nature of Jesus Christ and his death, derived from early Islam. This position does not appear to have any strong textual evidence from the traditions of the Prophet that is universally accepted as historically reliable, or from the Qur’an. Instead the theological position may have been influenced by debates between Muslims and Christians of the time about the relative merits of each religion and which of

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4/5.

them is 'true'. There is evidence to suggest that such theological debates occurred between Christians and Muslims as early as the first century of Islam in places like Damascus.⁵⁸

As has been noted above, the Qur'an in fact only mentions the crucifixion of Jesus in passing. It is not adopting a theological position (though it certainly does elsewhere concerning, for instance, the attribution of divinity, or not, to Jesus), but was only 'making a comment to rebuke the Jewish community in Medina, as reading the relevant text in its wider context makes clear.'⁵⁹

It undoubtedly became clear to these early Muslims that for Christians a great deal depended on belief in the event of the crucifixion. It was not just a tragic end for their 'Messiah', but one of the major foundation stones of the religion and embodied the heart of their theology. Therefore to stress the Muslim position, despite very ambiguous textual evidence, that Jesus did not die on the cross, was capable of undermining the very foundations of Christian theology. As Saeed explains:

In all likelihood, in the very early period of Muslim expansion into largely Christian areas outside Arabia, these passing references in the Qur'an may have become important proof texts for Muslims in Muslim-Christian debates on the question of which religion was true and authentic. By rejecting the very basis on which important theological positions were based, early Muslims were, perhaps, indirectly attempting to discredit the very foundations of Christian theology.⁶⁰

It is not certain how this position came about, but what is clear is that this Islamic belief that Jesus was not crucified has persisted strongly up to the present. Saeed explains that from the fourth and fifth centuries of Islam, creeds became a permanent feature, and 'in subsequent centuries it became very difficult to question such positions.'⁶¹ At this time also, the 'people of the book' (Jews and Christians) were considered 'unequal' to Muslims, and were treated as such in the 'body politic' of Muslim states.⁶² It was at this time also that the view that the Scriptures of Jews and Christians

⁵⁸ Saeed, *op.cit.*, p. 143/4. The author gives as an example in a footnote David Richard Thomas, *Syrian Christians and Islam: The First Thousand Years*, Leiden, E.J Brill, 2001. To this could be added Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*, Princeton University Press, 2008.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p. 144.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

‘were unreliable and distorted gained credence.’⁶³

It would seem that today, however, this attitude of polemics in Muslim/Christian relations is beginning to change, though there is no doubt still a long way to go. What is important is that the contextualist approach throws doubt on a long-standing interpretation of the text in question, that is, Q.4.157. It follows that ‘if the historical or textual basis of a particular theological position is not strong, a space is opened, in which it becomes possible to rethink these interpretations’,⁶⁴ despite the fact that they have been deeply embedded for centuries. This ‘open space’ of uncertainty can now lend itself to a re-interpretation of the text.

3.3.3 Characteristics of the contemporary context

Finally Saeed points out how different the contemporary context is today from that of the early centuries of Islam and the intervening periods, and this should have an effect on interpretation. There is, for instance, ‘a much stronger emphasis on mutual understanding between people of different faiths’, coupled with the fact that ‘intellectual freedom exists in large parts of the world today’, which means that scholars ‘have the freedom to examine and re-examine theological positions and interpretations.’⁶⁵ Today it is possible to question even long-held positions. In fact this frequently happens when major theologians and other leaders, both Muslim and Christian, engage in friendly discussions at meetings. This ‘spirit of enquiry’ in relation to interreligious understanding did not exist in the pre-modern period.⁶⁶

Another key characteristic of the contemporary context is globalisation, in the context of which borders are no hindrance, but at the same time it makes the need to live harmoniously together all the more necessary. In today’s world Muslim thinkers and scholars are able to examine in a critical spirit issues which do not have a clear textual basis in the Qur’an. This is especially desirable when they are obstacles to mutual understanding. Thus a number of Muslim scholars have been able ‘to bring aspects of Qur’anic interpretation that seemed to have been fixed for centuries

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

back into question.’⁶⁷ All these developments give hope for the future, but it takes a long time for deeply held convictions to change, and for the polemical spirit to be transformed into one where friendship can flourish and mutually contradictory ideas can be exchanged in a spirit of trust, where no religion is considered ‘superior’ to another, and where before God, or whatever is understood as ‘ultimate reality’, we are all equal as human beings.

3.4 A multidisciplinary approach

This chapter has attempted to show that progress is being made in the understanding of the Qur’an from a non-denominational, objective (insofar as any research can be unbiased and objective) perspective, which will hopefully help Muslim/Christian understanding. One of the most encouraging aspects of this approach to the study of the Qur’an is that it involves scholars of many disciplines and various religious affiliations, including Muslims, Christians and Jews. However there is still some resistance to this among Muslims. As Andrew Rippin has said: ‘Some object, from the perspective of Muslim orthodoxy, that a non-Muslim cannot and should not approach a text that means so much to so many people.’⁶⁸ In the so-called ‘Qur’anist movement’, such an attitude would be unacceptable. This contemporary movement, (known in Arabic al-Qur’aniyyun) was inspired in part by an Egyptian scholar named Ahmad Subhi Mansour, a professor at the famous Al-Azhar University in Cairo, who deviated from Muslim orthodoxy when he began to argue that ‘both Sunnism and Shi’ism are sects that deviated from the true, original Islam when they began to rely on ‘hadith’ as an authoritative source of religious practice and doctrine’. For adopting this position Mansour was removed from his post at al-Azhar and today lives in exile in the United States.⁶⁹ The Qur’anist approach involves:

setting aside divisions or classifications which might be imposed on the text of the Qur’an and predetermine possible readings of it. The point of the Qur’anist approach is to encounter the Qur’an itself, and not the Qur’an as it has been categorised, classified, and explained by others...it might be contrasted with the way some studies in the field of

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Andrew Rippin, ‘Western Scholarship and the Qur’an’ pp. 235-251, here at p. 245. This is Ch.11 in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’an, op.cit.*

⁶⁹ Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Emergence of Islam: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2012, p. 91.

Qur'anic Studies are shaped by the assumptions of medieval Islamic exegesis, or 'tafsir'....scholars who follow this approach may end up with a conclusion that agrees with medieval Islamic exegetes, but they will have arrived there because of the evidence of the Qur'an itself.⁷⁰

The book that this is quoted from is a product of the International Qur'anic Studies Association, which began at Notre Dame University, USA, in 2012, and now holds a yearly conference drawing scholars of many disciplines from around the world. It was from the beginning a joint Christian/Muslim project, being founded by Gabriel Said Reynolds and a Muslim friend from Houston, Associate Professor Emran El-Badawi, who is now Executive Director.⁷¹ An increasing number of Muslim scholars attend; at the 2017 conference they were in the majority. The mission statement of IQSA says that it was founded to 'foster Qur'anic scholarship through 'regular meetings of scholars of the Qur'an. This will involve 'cutting edge, intellectually rigorous, academic research on the Qur'an', which should be 'a bridge between different global communities of Qur'anic scholarship'. Among its core values are 'accountability, collaboration, respect for diversity and scholarly integrity'.⁷² The conferences bring Muslims and Christians together from around the world. The various specialities brought to the task of a modern interpretation of the Qur'an include 'Arabic language, comparative Semitic linguistics, palaeography, epigraphy, history, rhetorical theory, hermeneutics, and Biblical Studies.'⁷³

Another example of the multi-disciplinary approach from different faith perspectives is the recent project of the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* which 'certainly illustrates the point that the insider-outsider divide has no relevance in scholarly assessment.'⁷⁴ That is to say that when theology and doctrinal differences are side-lined and the Qur'an becomes an object of scientific study, for instance by historians, linguists, experts on ancient manuscripts etc., faith commitments can be 'bracketed'. Yet whilst these scholars are working together on a common project such as the

⁷⁰ Mehdi Azaiez, Gabriel S. Reynolds, Tommaso Tesei, Hamza M. Zafer, *The Qur'an Seminar Commentary: A Collaborative Study of 50 Qur'anic Passages*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston, 2016. See the Introduction by Gabriel S. Reynolds. *op.cit.* p. 1-12, here at p. 1.

⁷¹ Personal communication, Reynolds to author, 23 Sept. 20 17.

⁷² See *IQSA* website.

⁷³ Reynolds, *op.cit.* p. 1.

⁷⁴ Andrew Rippin, *op.cit.* p. 244.

Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an there must surely be some growth in mutual understanding and respect for different approaches.

4. Conclusion

The above developments are very promising for the future of Muslim/Christian understanding, but as Hassan has said, there is still a long and winding road ahead which can only be walked 'with patience and compassion.'⁷⁵ However, he would perhaps have more cause for optimism today, as modern communications, ease of travel and the ability of scholars to meet across generations and continents, has greatly facilitated progress. In addition Jean-Mohammed has stated his conviction that he believed Islam was 'in a state of ferment and awakening', being influenced profoundly by 'the critical spirit of Europe and North America.' It was his conviction that Islam wished to be 'purified' and 'deepened.'⁷⁶ All of this is important, but just as important is Hassan's conviction (and Jean-Mohammed's too, expressed similarly in various places), that Muslims 'must see Jesus in the Christians they meet.'⁷⁷ In other words, Christians must *be* Christians.

⁷⁵ Hassan Dehqani-Tafti. *Chimes of Church Bells*, p .9.

⁷⁶ *L'Islam et Nous*, p. 64/5.

⁷⁷ This is one of his underlined phrases in *I Believe in the Great Commission*, *op.cit.*, p. 152.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

1 Introductory remarks

The thesis has concentrated primarily on the theological and doctrinal complexities which have been highlighted by the conversion of Hassan Dehqani-Tafti and Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil from Islam to Christianity. The biographies of the converts have also been explored to give a context to the conversion process. It is clear that the context of the conversion of the two converts is very different. For Hassan, for instance, it was a long, slow process, and most importantly took place in his own country. His Christianity was very 'Persian', deeply embedded in his own culture, and this was of supreme importance to him. His almost complete breakdown when he had to go to Cambridge for studies for the ministry testifies to this. The conversion of Jean-Mohammed, by contrast, happened very suddenly (though it had to be consolidated slowly and gradually), in a foreign land away from his native Morocco. However, despite these very different contexts, I would argue that the circumstances of conversion have had no noticeable impact on their theological approach to the doctrines which have been discussed, such as the Trinity, the crucifixion, and the divinity of Jesus Christ.

In addition I have not emphasised particularly whether the converts were originally Shia or Sunni Muslims. Hassan was undoubtedly Shia and Jean-Mohammed Sunni, and although these two branches of Islam have some profound differences and disagreements, they are united in their opposition to the most important Christian doctrines such as the Trinity and the divine Sonship of Jesus Christ. Therefore for the purpose of the thesis this distinction is not important, although it has been noted in the matter of *tahrif* where it has caused a lot of strife between the two branches of Islam. Also the fact that Hassan converted to Anglicanism and Jean-Mohammed to Catholicism has not been stressed; again because the doctrinal issues which have been discussed are common to both Churches. However it may be said that it was perhaps providential that Hassan first encountered Christianity in the Anglican Communion and rose to prominence that Church. He

undoubtedly had a vocation to marriage as well as to the ministry, and could not have fulfilled this dual vocation in the Catholic Church, at least as an ordained priest/bishop.

In the thesis I have tried to engage personally, from my insider Christian/monastic perspective, with the theological issues discussed. This has not been easy, for as Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil has concluded, and I can only agree, there can be no *rapprochement* with Islam on this level.¹ Efforts have been made to see where we can draw closer together, and this is sometimes possible, but ultimately the chasm is too deep to cross completely. Jean-Mohammed was aware that on one level he was engaged on a hopeless task because of this huge chasm that separated Islam from the Church of Christ.² It is for this reason that I have sometimes found it necessary to 'bracket' my religious commitment to try to be less personally involved.

Despite the difficulties and obstacles, however, Jean-Mohammed decided that it was not a hopeless task for the Christian to try and understand Islam from the inside. He states his purpose in the first chapter of *L'Islam et Nous*; What do we know of Islam, he asks, what have we done for Islam? How, in relation to Islam, do we witness to the love of Christ?³ Later he says that what he is giving of knowledge of Islam from the inside is to 'help us [Christians] reflect and pray better.'⁴ Writing later in *Aspects intérieures de L'Islam*, where he develops and adds to issues he has dealt with in the aforementioned work, he is anxious to make the point that it is not the sort of book to read 'on the train'.⁵ He wants his readers to be patient; to take their time to understand and reflect. He insists again that he knows both Christianity and Islam from within, and therefore can be relied upon to help others, especially Christians, who wish to understand Islam from within.⁶ I have attempted to do this throughout the thesis, and found it a very rewarding exercise.

2 Research questions

The thesis has examined the life and writings of Hassan Dehqani-Tafti and Jean-Mohammed

¹ Paul Poupard of the *Institiut Catholique*, *op.cit.*, *Recueil*, p. 3

² *Ibid.*

³ *L'Islam et Nous*, *op.cit.*, p. 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵ *Aspects*, *op.cit.* p. 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Abd-el-Jalil with a view to obtaining a deeper understanding of Islam. I asked first of all, in view of the fact that both have experienced both Islam and Christianity from the inside, whether I could, from my own perspective of a committed Christian insider, achieve this end. I have entered into their life stories in some detail and experienced as if from within their struggles as they pass from one religion to the other, and from their writings, in particular from those of Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, I have a good understanding of Islam as he saw it from his Christian perspective. His memory of his former life as a Muslim is still very fresh in his mind as he writes, and sheds valuable light on several issues, as I have shown in Chapter Six. However, although Jean-Mohammed insists on his objective approach, I have cast doubt on this, and I have to question whether I have, or any Christian could, understand Islam from the perspective of a Muslim who has found his or her religion completely satisfying and has not thought of leaving it for Christianity or any other religion. Hassan Dehqani-Tafti's task was to explain Christianity to his Muslim converts in his parish situation, and the Muslims in his immediate environment, and as such he has helped me understand the problems Muslims have with Christian doctrine, from their outsider perspective.

My second question concerns doctrine. I ask if, building on the doctrinal issues raised in their writings, I can see any way Islam and Christianity can draw closer together on this level. This question has arguably been the main focus of my thesis, to which I was drawn by entering into the way Hassan negotiated the doctrinal difficulties he encountered on his journey to Christianity, for instance concerning the nature of God in Islam, to a very different understanding of the nature of a God in Christianity; a God who forsakes his lofty status and condescends to become man in Jesus Christ. Similarly Jean-Mohammed's conversion experience at the Christmas crib in Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris, highlights the same issue. He had to come to terms with the fact that this 'baby' was 'God-with-us' for Christians, which must have offended very deeply against the idea of the transcendent God, unmixed with anything human, that he had been familiar with in Islam since childhood. This issue of the nature of the God who reveals himself (or perhaps just his will, rather than his essence as Islam might claim) is at the heart of two seemingly very different revelations of

God. I have examined a variety of doctrinal topics in the writings of the two converts in Chapters Six and Seven. In the chapter on Hassan (Ch.7) I have highlighted three main topics; the Qur'anic Jesus, the Incarnation, and the Crucifixion of Jesus, and have shown how different the Muslim and Christian approaches are to these issues. In the writings of Jean-Mohammed I have dealt with monotheism, God as Father and Creator, revelation, the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad. Revelation is mentioned by Jean-Mohammed (Ch.6, section 3.6 and 7) in a way which highlights the profound difference in understanding of this issue between the two religions. It is my tentative conclusion that Islam and Christianity can sometimes draw closer together on this level, as I have shown in the treatment of the crucifixion, especially in Chapter Eight, which examines the contextualist approach to the Qur'an.

In my third research question I asked whether anything in the writings of the two converts could offer any guidance, or pointers, for a way forward in our present struggle to improve Muslim/Christian understanding. Based on some remarks made by the two converts I have analysed this question and given some response in Chapter Eight. What both men called for was some scientific study of the Qur'an and a study of the history of Christianity. Although the point has been made that there is very little study of Christianity by Muslim scholars, despite the fact that a good number of Christian scholars have studied Islam in depth, this is beginning to change and there is a glimmer of hope on the horizon. This is happening in the important area of revelation itself, which I have discussed in Chapter Six.

3 Final reflections

The thesis has tended to emphasise the seemingly insurmountable doctrinal differences between Islam and Christianity, and following suggestions in the writings of Hassan Dehqani-Tafti and Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, has explored how the Qur'anic text is now being subjected to the same scientific investigation as has the Bible. In addition to this I suggest that on a spiritual level, Muslims and Christians could draw closer together by engaging with each other's Scriptures. For instance Michael Fitzgerald M.Afr. has attempted to do this in his book *Praise the Name of the Lord:*

*Meditations on the Most Beautiful Names of God.*⁷ These ‘names’ are all based on the Qur’anic text; according to Q.59:23: ‘The best names belong to Him. Everything in the heavens and the earth glorifies Him.’ Fitzgerald quotes this text closely followed by a sentence from Jean-Mohammed’s work *Aspects intérieures de L’Islam*, (which has been examined earlier in the thesis) which reads, ‘Certainly, one of the best ways of understanding a people is to meditate on the texts they use for prayer.’⁸ After warning that there are pitfalls in this method, such as giving a false interpretation to the meaning of the sacred books of other religions, by which he seems to imply a Christian reading, he emphasises that the texts must be allowed to speak for themselves. He then takes several themes which can be fruitfully explored in both the Qur’an and the Bible. These include *God the Creator, The Transcendent God, God with us, God our Peace* etc.⁹ While insisting that for this exercise one must remain absolutely faithful to one’s own tradition, he goes on to ask whether it is actually possible to obtain inspiration from the sacred texts of other religions. In answer he quotes from the *Groupe de Recherche Islamo-Chrétien* (GRIC), a Muslim-Christian Research Group of French speaking Christians and Muslims who have been meeting since 1977, who have said: ‘We do not think that the divine Word, the foundation of our faith, belongs exclusively to us, whether we be Christians or Muslims.’¹⁰ Although it may not be easy for a Christian to read the Qur’an in this way, it can be an important gesture of ‘interreligious ecumenism’.

Finally, Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, who was painfully aware of the deep gulf separating Islam and Christianity, was also aware of how close they could be on a spiritual level, despite the huge doctrinal differences. The term ‘ecumenism of the people of the book’ is used by Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil in a small book brought out just after the Second Vatican Council which produced the important document *Nostra Aetate*.¹¹ ‘Ecumenism’ is an expression normally used

⁷ Michael Fitzgerald M.Afr., *Praise the Name of the Lord: Meditations on the Most Beautiful Names of God*, Rome, Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d’Islamistica, 2015.

⁸ *Ibid.* Introduction, pp. 15-23, here at p. 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Orientations pour un Dialogue Entre Chrétiens et Musulmans*, published by the *Secretariat pro Non-Christianis*, in 1959. I am indebted to Fr Maurice Borrmans for the gift of his personal copy of this book, and

within Christianity to describe the process of different denominations coming together for prayer or dialogue. However in a footnote Jean-Mohammed reveals that in this case the expression ‘ecumenism of the people of the book’ actually came from a Muslim, whom he does not name.¹² He goes on to claim from his insider perspective that this desire for a unity of all believers is not absent from the Muslim religious mentality, for It is founded on faith in God who is ‘One, Subsistent and Merciful’, which is the deepest bond that unites Jews, Christians and Muslims.¹³ To illustrate this he uses the different understandings of God. About Muslims, he says:

Their theology, like their worship and personal piety, insists on the Very Great God, the Impenetrable Master, without equal, the One and Only God, the fullness of Being, who is supreme over the whole of creation, and on whom the believer recognises himself to be totally dependent, and submits his will without reserve to Him... this is the soul of Islam.¹⁴

However, continues Jean-Mohammed:

Christians also recognise the absolute transcendence of God, to which faith in God, One and three, gives infinite depth, but at the same time they affirm a presence of grace and love which causes mankind to enter into divine intimacy. They [Christians] insist particularly strongly on this last aspect, without diminishing in any way the transcendence in which he is bound to believe.¹⁵

Muslims cannot accept Jesus as the ‘Son of God’, he says, because it seems to them ‘impossible to purify this word of its carnal resonances’. Nevertheless, he continues, ‘God, whom he [the Muslim] affirms as the Wholly Other, infinitely above anything created, is for him the Merciful One who envelops all his existence and holds him close, without any barrier of secondary causes or intermediaries.’¹⁶ ‘There is not, therefore’, concludes Jean-Mohammed, ‘an unbridgeable abyss on either side on the level of *lived* religious thought between Christians and Muslims.’¹⁷ If this is born in mind the doctrinal difficulties assume their true perspective.

the information that it was a joint venture, Jean-Mohammed being responsible for the final chapter, *Spiritualité du chrétien engagé dans le dialogue*, pp. 125-147, used here. This early document has since been updated and replaced. by *Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslim*. See, for instance, as published by *Interreligious Documents*, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, prepared by Maurice Borrmans, translated from the French by R. Marston Speight, Paulist Press, 1990. Fr Maurice Borrmans died on 26 December 2017, aged 92.

¹² See section entitled ‘Oecuménisme’ des gens du livre, footnote 1, p. 127.

¹³ See *Ibid.*, p. 128.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

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