

This article was written by Chris Hewer as a contribution to the two-volume posthumous book to mark the contribution of Prof. David Kerr, the Founder-Director of the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations in Selly Oak, Birmingham (*World Christianity in Muslim Encounter: Essays in memory of David A Kerr*, Vol II, (ed.) Stephen Goodwin, London: Continuum, 2009). David died in his early sixties, just at the moment when he had settled to polish and publish the contributions that he had made to the field orally during four decades. The article seeks the rationale and spirit behind the founding of the Centre – as much needed today as when it was founded.

An enduring vision: the Study Centre at Selly Oak

Introduction

For those of us involved in the world of Christian-Muslim relations, the name of David Kerr will for ever evoke the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations that he founded at the Selly Oak Colleges in 1976. As the reality of the Centre passes into memory, it is important in the context of the current Festschrift to record something of that vision from early documentation and the memories of those involved over the first decade.

The Federation of the Selly Oak Colleges was an ideal setting for the Centre. The Colleges grew up from the early 20th century onwards around an original Quaker foundation. Each College was independent, formed by a particular Christian group, generally with the original vision of training missionaries for service overseas. In the second half of the century, the emphasis gradually shifted from being sending agencies to being receivers of students coming from many countries around the world for further study, better to serve their communities at home. The flavour of Selly Oak as an international community is best summed up in a favourite saying of one of its Presidents, "You can go to the furthest flung parts of the world, where people have never heard of Birmingham, but if English is spoken there you will find in Christian circles an immediate recognition of the name Selly Oak". My own experience reflects that of countless others, to walk into the library of John Knox College in Dunedin, New Zealand, and mention that I had come from Selly Oak, only to find a group of people gathering around to say: "I studied there" or "my father was there" and so on. The second essential characteristic of Selly Oak was that the Colleges were founded on faith and lived by faith. There was no pretence of disengaged secular study of religion, many had given their lives to the cause of God. Finally, the Selly Oak Colleges were a rich tapestry of Christian diversity, in which, for example, although each College had its own traditions of worship, every Wednesday morning there was "Federal Worship" in the George Cadbury Hall, which was led in turn by each College or teaching unit, so that all were exposed to all. The Federation is no more and most of the Colleges and teaching units have been closed or absorbed by the University, but many surely around the world bless its name in their devotions. David Kerr himself wrote, "Our success is due in large measure to the Selly Oak tradition of which we are

part, a tradition which elicits dedication to ideals and courageous determination to turn them into the best reality possible – which will not be as good as we want, but is likely to be much better than our many cynical observers tend to expect."¹

It was at Selly Oak after the 1914-18 War that the story of Islamic Studies began, with the appointment of Dr Alphonse Mingana, a displaced Syrian scholar, as the first Lecturer in Islam. This was part of the vision of Prof. Rendell Harris, a renowned scripture scholar from Woodbrooke College, the original Quaker foundation. It was Rendell Harris who endowed the Central Library of the Selly Oak Colleges with his own collection, on condition that it should always be available for public access, and this occasioned the construction of the Central Library building, in which the Centre in due course was to be housed. Mingana, facilitated by the financial support of Dr Edward Cadbury, toured the Middle East to gather together Syriac and Arabic manuscripts of Christian and Muslim provenance to form the world renowned "Mingana Collection". Harris' successor as Director of Studies at Woodbrooke was Herbert G. Wood, later to become the first Professor of Theology at the University of Birmingham in 1940. In his inaugural lecture he spelt out his vision, which pre-figured so much about the Centre, which was to be formed some thirty-six years later:

"It would be a unique achievement if we in Birmingham could do something parallel to the programme which Rabindranath Tagore is attempting to carry out in Santiniketan. There he hopes to have the great cultures of East and West represented side by side with their own scholarly exponents... In all this he aims at promoting a fellowship of faiths based not on the assumption that all religions are equally true and mean the same thing at bottom, but on the sure foundation of mutual respect and honest undertaking."²

Mingana died in 1937 and his work continued from the mid-40s under the direction of James Sweetman, who wrote the magisterial four volume work *Islam and Christian Theology*, built up the book collection of the Library and for more than twenty years guided generations of Christian missionaries going to work in Muslim lands. Sweetman had served at the Henry Martyn Institute for Islamic Studies in Hyderabad, India, thus he combined an academic interest in the study of Islam with active missionary endeavour. The spirit of Islamic studies at Selly Oak changed under Sweetman's successor, John B. Taylor, "for whom interfaith dialogue was an integral part of the ecumenical ministry of the Church, not to be subsumed under mission."³ It was in Taylor's time that Muslims as well as Christians began to study Islam at Selly Oak and the arrangement began with the University of Birmingham to enter students for their postgraduate degrees. After John Taylor left for Geneva in 1973 to work in the dialogue departments of the World Council of Churches, the stage was set for the appointment of David Kerr as Selly Oak Lecturer in Islam.

Short form: The *Newsletter* of the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham B29 6LQ, is shortened herein to: *Newsletter*.

¹ Kerr, D.A., "A personal pilgrimage with Islam", in *Newsletter*, No 19, 1988, p. 6.

² Kerr, D.A., "The 10th anniversary of the Study Centre", in *Newsletter*, No 15, 1986, p. 10.

³ Kerr, D.A., "The 10th anniversary of the Study Centre", in *Newsletter*, No 15, 1986, p. 5.

The preparation of the man

David began his academic career by reading Arabic and Islamic Studies at the London School of Oriental and African Studies. It was here, fuelled by the study of Norman Daniel's *Islam and the West: the making of an image*, that an abhorrence of the polemical character of much of historical Christian-Muslim relations developed. "[This was] the book which first stirred my sense of Christian obligation to try to root out this evil from the soul of Western Christianity. ...polemical characterisation is as seriously a cancerous malignancy in the polemicist as it is maligning of the polemicised: equally, dialogue helps us avoid false witness against *ourselves* as well as against others."⁴ It was also at this time that another key concept of the Centre was born, that of friendship and hospitality: "...the intellectual hospitality of the discussion group, the spiritual hospitality of friendship, or the many human hospitalities which I received as a vagabond hitch-hiker in the Middle East, I felt myself richly gifted as a human being by Muslim acquaintances. In my time in Birmingham my experience of Muslim hospitality has been deepened and enriched through extensive personal contact with the Muslim population of this city."⁵ From London, David went on to read Christian theology in Oxford under the tutelage of men such as Professors George Caird and Robert Zaehner, the latter it was who introduced the "awkward Calvinist" Kerr to the mystical theology of Christianity and Islam. It was Zaehner who wrote, "...the Qur'an is to the Muslim not as the Bible but as Christ to the Christian, and by it the Muslim may rise to the same and ultimately unspeakable mystical experience and knowledge of peace with God as the Christian can through Christ."⁶ After theological studies, David began to prepare his doctoral thesis under the supervision of Albert Hourani on relations between Christian and Muslim communities in Syria and Lebanon.

For the period of this research and afterwards as a BBC journalist and broadcaster, David was immersed in the history and contemporary situation of the Arab world. It was at this time that he came under the influence of the Bishop of Mount Lebanon, George Khodr, who expanded his imagination in thinking about the Trinity as a co-equal partnership. "Hence the Holy Spirit is free to roam wheresoever it/she/he wills – outside the Church of history as much as within; and wheresoever the Spirit is operative, the fullness of the Godhead is proleptically present in mystery, in the inseparable activity of creation and salvation whereby God graciously brings all creation and all human beings to perfection... The mission of the Church, in Khodr's sense, is to be spiritually affirming of the truth of God he expects to find in Islam, not in spite of Jesus Christ but because of the nature of God the Holy Spirit."⁷

⁴ Kerr, D.A., "A personal pilgrimage with Islam", in *Newsletter*, No 19, 1988, p. 9.

⁵ Kerr, D.A., "A personal pilgrimage with Islam", in *Newsletter*, No 19, 1988, p. 10.

⁶ Kerr, D.A., "A personal pilgrimage with Islam", in *Newsletter*, No 19, 1988, p. 15.

⁷ Kerr, D.A., "A personal pilgrimage with Islam", in *Newsletter*, No 19, 1988, p. 17. For further reference see Khodr, G., "Christianity in a pluralist world – the Economy of the Holy Spirit", in *The Ecumenical Review*, April 1971, pp. 118-128.

The seedbed of a vision

The man who had been formed by these human, spiritual and intellectual experiences was appointed as the Selly Oak Lecturer in Islam in 1973, and in the near seclusion of the Mingana Room at the far end of the Central Library, "the guiding hand of God", to use Prof. H.G. Wood's phrase,⁸ began to lead him to develop a vision of a Study Centre in Islam and Christianity, as "a place where Christians and Muslims may meet to study together at all levels in total obedience to their respective faiths, and in a spirit of openness to one another and of trust".⁹ These ideas of course did not grow in a vacuum. The particularity of the Selly Oak context has already been noted, but in other parts of the world there were Christian study centres established for the study of Islam, notably the Henry Martyn Institute in Hyderabad, India, the Christian Study Centre in Rawalpindi, the Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islamic Studies, Rome and the Near East School of Theology in Beirut. The work of these study centres was explored and expounded in a background paper for a consultation of around one hundred Christians and Muslims interested in the possibility of establishing "a Christian centre for the study of Islam" at Selly Oak held on 9-11 May, 1975.¹⁰ Of particular importance from this survey as regards the Centre are the following: the growing trend towards Christian ecumenical partnership in such endeavours, the creative tension between theological study and developing tools for work within society, the emerging need to be "talking with" and not just "talking about" Muslims, the need for such a study centre in Europe where a much more religiously plural society was developing and not just in Africa and Asia, and the close relationship between such a study centre and the churches to which it offers its services.

An important development reported in this consultation paper was the meeting between an equal number of Christians and Muslims in Broumana, Lebanon in July 1972 to discuss the theme: "In search of understanding and co-operation: Christian and Muslim contributions". Two elements from the closing agreed memorandum are worthy of note in the context of the Centre:

Frank Witness: We did not ask each other to suppress or conceal his convictions. In dialogue each should bear witness to his motives to his fellows and to God. This frank witness can help to remove complacency, suspicion or unspoken fears.

Mutual Respect: We believed that mutual respect was a necessary principle for our dialogue. This does not involve a stale co-existence of 'live and let live', but a sensitive regard for the partner's scruples and convictions, a sympathy for his difficulties and an admiration for his achievements. We should avoid all invidious comparison of strength in our tradition with weakness in the other, of the ideal in one with the actuality in the other.¹¹

⁸ Kerr, D.A., "A personal pilgrimage with Islam", in *Newsletter*, No 19, 1988, p. 7.

⁹ Kerr, D.A., "The 10th anniversary of the Study Centre", in *Newsletter*, No 15, 1986, p. 5.

¹⁰ Taylor, J.B., *Selly Oak Colleges Consultation on Possibilities for a Christian Centre for the Study of Islam, May 9-11, 1975*, April 1975.

¹¹ Taylor, J.B., *Selly Oak Colleges Consultation on Possibilities for a Christian Centre for the Study of Islam, May 9-11, 1975*, April 1975, p. 5.

Another area of the world where Christians and Muslims have lived side by side for centuries is West Africa. It was in Accra, Ghana, that the World Council of Churches drew together Muslims and Christians from across Africa to explore the theme: "The unity of God and the community of mankind: co-operation between African Muslims and African Christians in work and witness". From its closing memorandum the following paragraphs are instructive:

People of living faiths from both sides ought to share their concerns and understanding not in an attempt to forge an alliance against anybody but as a sign of their witness to God and of their responsibility for each other and the world...

Dialogue is therefore concerned about personal meeting and encounter and co-operation in work and worship as well as about sustained mutual involvement in local level contacts. It can lead to a common desire for a search for truth and a reciprocal exchange of intimations and insights with each other, thus deepening and strengthening our knowledge of each other and religious truth. This personal dimension needs to be stressed lest dialogue be mistakenly seen simply as some kind of comparative religion wherein academic comparisons are made of creed and dogma for their own sake. Also dialogue as the meeting of persons is different from, indeed critical of, conversion understood as a "numbers game" or a crusade for a membership drive. The attitude that sees conversion either as a piece of statistical manipulation or a triumphant band-waggoning is contrary to the spirit of dialogue. Dialogue sees conversion as a growing awareness of the presence of God in an encounter in which each becomes responsible for the other and where both seek openness in witness before God.¹²

Finally, this time from the Southeast Asian context, in early 1975 a regional meeting of Muslims and Christians took place in Hong Kong under the theme "Muslims and Christians in society: towards good-will, consultation and working together in Southeast Asia". From its memorandum the following paragraph is important in our context:

Our religions have the responsibility to alert society to religious, moral and spiritual values in the changing circumstances of daily life. Our responsibility is to enhance the total development of the human personality, spirituality and society, and to stand squarely behind all that promotes justice and peace. Our religions are called upon to offer fresh motivations and fresh guidance for the growing expectations and changing aspirations of human beings in society.¹³

¹² Taylor, J.B., *Selly Oak Colleges Consultation on Possibilities for a Christian Centre for the Study of Islam, May 9-11, 1975*, April 1975, p. 7.

¹³ Taylor, J.B., *Selly Oak Colleges Consultation on Possibilities for a Christian Centre for the Study of Islam, May 9-11, 1975*, April 1975, p. 8.

A Centre at Selly Oak

These then were the situations around the world that contributed to the development of an idea for a Study Centre at Selly Oak. The development of Muslim communities in Britain and the rest of Europe was a powerful impetus behind the move, and Birmingham by this time had a Muslim population in the region of 25-30,000. "The time is overdue for the Church in the West to show a more direct and extensive commitment to its part in the Christian apostolate in relation to Islam, not only overseas but, just as important, to the increasingly large Muslim communities now resident in parts of Europe."¹⁴ The four headline objectives for the proposed Centre, written by David himself in a discussion proposal, are noteworthy for the power and balance of the language:

1. Within the contexts of the theological interests of the Selly Oak Colleges, to assist Christians, in brotherly collaboration with Muslims, to study the faith and practice of Islam in a spirit of reverence and compassion.
2. To help the Church in the United Kingdom and Western Europe to understand and accept more fully its part in the Christian apostolate in relation to Islam in Europe and beyond...
3. To initiate joint study ventures, bringing Christians and Muslims together to discuss their mutual concerns, and to encourage and support others in this pursuit.
4. To cooperate to the fullest possible extent with all other centres for the study of Islam.¹⁵

In proximate preparation for the critical May 1975 consultation, the vision for the Centre sharpened in a background paper prepared by David the month before. Here we read that:

The conception of the nature and function of the centre... is as follows: "That the centre should be a place of research, teaching and information, in which Christians and Muslims may co-operate in the study of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations to their mutual enrichment and toward the deepening of friendship and understanding between the Christian and Muslim communities, especially in Europe."¹⁶

In addition to standard teaching and research work, particular attention was drawn to "Service to the wider community", by which was meant the many people, services and institutions which were coming into contact with Muslims and Islam but without the necessary background knowledge of faith and practice to facilitate their service to the same. These included what would today come under the heading of "Islam awareness training" for police, social workers, teachers, members of the caring professions, clergy and various other interest groups. The Centre was envisioned as a support provider for others delivering frontline service in these fields. "Within the European

¹⁴ Kerr, D.A., *Proposal: The creation of a centre for the study of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations, to be part of the Selly Oak Colleges*, 31 October 1974, p. 1.

¹⁵ Kerr, D.A., *Proposal: The creation of a centre for the study of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations, to be part of the Selly Oak Colleges*, 31 October 1974, p. 2.

¹⁶ Kerr, D.A., *Background Paper: suggestions regarding the work of a centre for the study of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations in Selly Oak Colleges*, April 1975, p. 1.

context it could function as a centre for the gathering and dissemination of information about Christian-Muslim relations throughout the continent."¹⁷

"Study-in-dialogue"

A key phrase that enters into the literature at this stage is "study in dialogue", by which was meant, "the approach should be dialogical since men of one faith cannot expect to understand, let alone appreciate, the faith of others without their closest collaboration. This clearly goes as much for Muslims who wish to understand Christianity as for Christians who wish to understand Islam, and the centre would properly be concerned with both."¹⁸ Ten years later, this phrase had come to symbolise "the key principle in the whole enterprise of the Centre":

"Study-in-dialogue" rejects syncretism or compromise on the one hand and defensive apologetics on the other. It searches for deeper understanding of Islam and Christianity as each religion is understood by its adherents. Its interest lies in people of living faith and thus with religious traditions as dynamic realities, not historical relics. It takes seriously the challenges of society in which Muslims and Christians live and seek to apply their faith. It tries to "feel" what it means to be Christian and Muslim, not sentimentally, but in recognition that we are bound together as people of faith in the One God.

Faith is properly expressed in the language of creed, doctrine and theology; in these Muslims and Christians say much in common and much distinctively, and their language(s) can be understood intellectually. But faith is also expressed in the language of "worship" as lives are lived in thanksgiving to God, in obedience to His Loving Will, in openness to all His human creatures, and in inward reflection. This moves us to the language of service and of prayer, and here "study-in-dialogue" helps us to perceive freshly how God touches the lives of those of another faith and what this means for our own."¹⁹

Indeed the importance of this phrase can be seen in the final wording selected for the title of the Centre: "Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations", by which the key verb "to study" relates both to Islam and Christian-Muslim relations and yet the latter also has the active sense of practical positive engagement; so, both doing and studying the relations between Christians and Muslims. "The concern for academic excellence could thus be combined with the ethical and spiritual quest for interfaith understanding with the result that the Study Centre would have a distinctive place among the universities of Britain and western Europe, offering the Christian and Muslim communities a unique resource."²⁰

¹⁷ Kerr, D.A., *Background Paper: suggestions regarding the work of a centre for the study of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations in Selly Oak Colleges*, April 1975, p. 3.

¹⁸ Kerr, D.A., *Background Paper: suggestions regarding the work of a centre for the study of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations in Selly Oak Colleges*, April 1975, p. 3.

¹⁹ Kerr, D.A., "Editorial", in *Newsletter*, No 14, 1985, p. 2.

²⁰ Kerr, D.A., "The 10th anniversary of the Study Centre", in *Newsletter*, No 15, 1986, p. 5.

Consultation, May 1975

All this reflection resulted in the consultation of Christians and Muslims in Selly Oak from 9-11 May 1975 to discuss the potential establishment of the Centre. Much of what emerged from that consultation has already been foreseen in the foregoing but certain phrases have become seminal: "...a Centre where Christians and Muslims may meet to study together at all levels, in total obedience to their respective faiths and in a spirit of openness to one another and of trust."²¹ "We accept as a guiding principle in the study of each religion that full account be given to the ways in which each religion is understood and practised by its followers. We desire that the Centre should be a place of meeting between Christians and Muslims where, within the bond of friendship, both parties may pursue frank and rigorous enquiry, and prepare for sensitive response to their varied vocations."²² "In order that these objectives should be achieved, we strongly urge that Muslims be invited to take their place alongside Christians at all levels of the planning and working of the Centre – in the studentship, on the staff and on the consultative bodies."²³ Both Muslims and Christians were to be appointed to the academic staff; "In making appointments to these positions we feel that requirements of academic excellence should be combined with commitment to the ideals of the Centre."²⁴

It's people that make the Centre

And so the Centre was born. From the outset, the element of service to and links with the churches of Europe, North America and Africa was important. The support from the churches was immense; for several years in the 80s, no less than three posts from the five at the Centre were supported by church links: two staff members seconded from North American churches and one other salary provided by the European churches. In return, there were specialist research projects on Muslims in Europe (Jørgen Nielsen), the history of Christian-Muslim relations (Bert Breiner) and the Islam in Africa project (Sigvard von Sicard), staff members travelled to read papers at conferences and teach intensive courses, clergy and church workers were sent to the Centre for up to a year's tuition and every year several came for shorter periods to gain knowledge and experience to take back to the churches that sent them.²⁵ This work had an impact too on secular agencies that were disposed to view European minorities only in terms of race, ethnicity, culture or sociology; they learnt to take religious identity seriously into the equation and realised that the Centre's resources were second to none.²⁶

The Centre is a deliberate attempt on the part of its Muslim and Christian founders, advisers and staff members to deal with the fact that their two religious traditions have a common, if unequal, historical and contemporary presence in Europe as "neighbours". Consequently, the Centre is

²¹ *Draft statement of the Christian-Muslim Consultation: 9-11 May 1975*, at the Selly Oak Colleges.

²² From the *Guidelines* that emerged from the Consultation, cited in: Kerr, D.A., "The 10th anniversary of the Study Centre", in *Newsletter*, No 15, 1986, p. 6.

²³ *Draft statement of the Christian-Muslim Consultation: 9-11 May 1975*, at the Selly Oak Colleges.

²⁴ *Draft statement of the Christian-Muslim Consultation: 9-11 May 1975*, at the Selly Oak Colleges.

²⁵ Kerr, D.A., "The 10th anniversary of the Study Centre", in *Newsletter*, No 15, 1986, p. 7.

²⁶ Kerr, D.A., "The 10th anniversary of the Study Centre", in *Newsletter*, No 15, 1986, p. 7.

consciously committed to breaking out of the spiral of polemics which, as we have already inferred, marks the continuing history of European Christian attitudes towards Islam as a religious civilisation, and towards Muslims as people, and *vice versa*. To break out of the polemical tradition and to heal the wounds and scars it has inflicted means nothing less than to live faithfully to two of the Toraic commandments accepted by Christians and Muslims alike: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour", and "You shall love your neighbour as yourself".²⁷

The contribution of Muslim scholars who shared "the ideals of the Centre" cannot be overestimated. It was this lived reality and example of Christian-Muslim interaction that set the tone for the Centre's life and spirit. The first full-time Muslim member of staff, Hasan Askari, was no stranger to pioneering thought and applying intellectual rigour to the study of Islam and interfaith relations. In the early 80s there was a stream of part-time and visiting Muslim lecturers, who brought a breadth of wisdom and credibility to the work of the Centre as never before. Mention must be made of Syed Mitwalli El-Darsh, from al-Azhar,²⁸ Khalid Alavi, from the University of the Punjab,²⁹ and Al-Tayib Zein al-Abdin, from the University of Khartoum, who commented:

To my surprise, I found that the Islam Centre in Selly Oak Colleges is more tolerant and accommodating to Muslim points of view than the secular universities. The Centre is committed to present Islam as a true faith of God and to present a Christian-Muslim dialogue which promotes understanding and peaceful co-existence. This is where the real merit of the Centre lies.³⁰

Over the years, there was a steady flow of visitors from both faith traditions and from all parts of the world. Truly, the Centre was a place of pilgrimage, and "Pilgrims discover that they have gifts and strengths which they may share with others, and that their fellow pilgrims have gifts and strengths to share with them."³¹ Some visitors would come to share their experiences with the Centre or to seek wisdom and good counsel, some would give a formal seminar and others share in Centre activities for a time. Some visitors appeared only once but many more made frequent visits; all hopefully became ambassadors of the message of the ideals of the Centre and passed on the word that there was an open door.

To all these visitors we would express our gratitude for helping us achieve one of the fundamental purposes for which the Study Centre exists – to be a place of meeting between Christians and Muslims from different parts of the world, where experiences can be shared, situations analysed, and

²⁷ Kerr, D.A., "Special Focus: Part One, Christian-Muslim relations: a challenge within Europe", in *Newsletter*, No 9, 1983, p. 8.

²⁸ See "Interview" in *Newsletter*, No 12, 1984, pp. 3-11.

²⁹ See "Special Focus: Professor Khalid Alavi" in *Newsletter*, No 16, 1986, pp. 9-18.

³⁰ Al-Abdin, Al-Tayib Z., "How did I find Selly Oak? – A word of encouragement", in *Newsletter*, No 17/18, 1987, pp. 4-6.

³¹ Kerr, D.A., "Editorial", in *Newsletter*, No 13, 1985, p. 3.

friendships deepened by thinking through the challenges which confront those of us who are committed to living interfaith.³²

One element of the original Consultation that established the Guidelines for the Centre was "appropriate practical outreach" within both faith communities and to the wider human society in which we all live. There was a conviction that, "The academic study of religions emasculates its subject if it refuses to take seriously the religious convictions by which the faithful live and relate to one another as "witnesses" in the world of human society".³³ Within five years of the foundation of the Centre, David wrote:

...we have learned how the Study Centre's internal teaching and research activities themselves need to be informed, in both mind and spirit, by the everyday experience of both Muslims and Christians as they meet, or avoid each other, in western society and in the many other parts of the world from which we in the West have so much to learn.

The Extension Programme, therefore, should not be thought of as an appendage to the internal activities of the Study Centre – a concession to "ordinary" Muslims and Christians by a privileged few. Such a view would be repugantly elitist, arrogantly hypocritical and worst of all, would betray the insight we value within both Islamic and Christian consciousness – that before the One God all humankind without distinction stands in need of God's Guidance and Grace.

It is within this framework of thought that the "Centre" element of our title finds its meaning. We must strive to stand at the centre of the Muslim and Christian communities in Britain – or more exactly, in the centre of that area of eclipse, sometimes smaller sometimes larger, between the "circles" of Muslims and Christians in this society. Only thus will the Study Centre be authentically a place of existential meeting between Christians and Muslims, and only thus will it be able to relate authentically to Muslims and Christians in other parts of the world.³⁴

The principal way in which this extension ideal was fulfilled was through the annual ten-day residential Summer School, which drew people from all five continents, from both communities and from a wide range of backgrounds. They were of course hugely demanding on staff time and effort as people came expecting access to those who could educate and inspire them from breakfast to bedtime. However, this extension element of the Centre alone touched the lives of many hundreds of people, and through them the communities to which they belonged and which they served.

The intimacy of friendship

The collective term "the Centre" stands above adequate definition. Many of those who came as students or visitors had decades of experience to contribute and were established academics or religious leaders in their own right, thus often "students" taught "teachers". Leaders from the local Muslim communities showed their support

³² Kerr, D.A., "News and Events: visitors", in *Newsletter*, No 10, 1983, p. 7.

³³ Kerr, D.A., "The Extension Programme: a conceptual introduction", in *Newsletter*, No 3, 1980, p. 2.

³⁴ Kerr, D.A., "The Extension Programme: a conceptual introduction", in *Newsletter*, No 3, 1980, p. 2.

for the Centre by enrolling themselves for higher degrees and thus broadening out the Centre community into the city and beyond. The very setting of the Centre within the Central Library meant that seminar room, library, student study facilities and staff and administrative offices were physically interwoven. Students knew that if the Library was open and even if their own tutor or supervisor was not present they would soon find the door open to another staff office where someone would be waiting to help. Within the Central Library itself, there was a discrete Centre library arranged in such a way that facilitated the use of Centre students, so that it became in itself a pedagogic tool. The Centre could never be economically independent and would not have been created or survived without the generous support of the Cadbury Trusts and thus the wider family of the Selly Oak Colleges. The "spirit of Selly Oak", to which reference has already been made, inspired not only dedication from employed personnel but also the willing contribution of volunteers; how many students, faced with writing a thesis in their second, third, fourth or even fifth language, to this day bless the services offered by such volunteers! A natural support system was created by holding incoming post in the administrative office, so that students and staff were bound to "look in" each day, to what was the living hearth around which everyone gathered. At times there was a "Centre book" selected for a term, which everyone read and discussed together, so as to break down the isolation of research and ensure that all were fed by and contributed to "the Centre spirit". Each week there was a "Centre seminar", attendance at which was expected from all staff, visitors and students, so that all might learn from one another. On the principal teaching day, which drew in the part-time students, there was also "Centre tea" to create a social forum where people might meet naturally. The size of the Centre, generally in the region of thirty people with a stable core around which others came and went, meant that friendships developed as natural loci of learning and support. Many of those friendships have endured for decades and people who could hardly acknowledge each other "at home" found in the Centre a safe haven where it was possible to break through barriers of suspicion and prejudice.

Being made up of women and men of faith from both Muslim and Christian communities, there were of course provisions for prayer, fasting and the celebration of festivals woven into the fabric of the Centre. No-one was expected to ignore or subjugate their faith; to the contrary the whole vision of the Centre was that "study-in-dialogue" would not just inform an awareness of the faith of the other but in that process strengthen one's own faith through shared reflection and learning from the other. It became the practice at the Centre for everyone to meet for a timetabled period of "Reflection" each week, during which in turn people from both communities would share something of their own scripture and writings, and then reflect on them in a way that could illumine all. In the stillness of the Reflection, hearts were expanded just as intellects were in the seminar room or library. The final words on this belong to David himself:

What cannot be programmed but is nonetheless essential to the Study Centre is the dynamic of spiritual reflection and prayer – a fundamental life-stance of Muslim and Christian alike. "Prayer", said one of the Muslims involved in the Study Centre, "is the actualisation of peace". As the Study

Centre is a place of peace between Christians and Muslims, so also is it a place of prayer that God will lead us, as in a pilgrimage, into His future.³⁵

Needed now more than ever

And so we return quite rightly to "the guiding hand of God" with which Prof. H.G. Wood launched the vision without quite knowing it in 1940. This article has focused exclusively on the development of the man and the vision behind the Centre, and the way in which that vision worked towards its fulfilment until 1988 when David left for Hartford Seminary. For a constellation of reasons, in the subsequent years the vision has shifted and other things have been achieved. Birmingham's Muslim population now heads towards 200,000, an increase reflected in Britain and around Europe. The hypothetical question, "What if the original vision had endured and developed over these twenty years?" can be the subject of speculation, but surely we can conclude that "the Centre": people, faith, community links, study, vision and outreach, would have much to contribute to the 21st century. The original enduring vision remains somehow wraith-like, waiting to be called into a new birth, in circumstances that will be different but in which elements of the enduring vision will find their fulfilment and future generations will come to bless the name and vision of David Kerr.

³⁵ Kerr, D.A., "Special Focus: Part One, Christian-Muslim relations: a challenge within Europe", in *Newsletter*, No 9, 1983, p. 10.