

This article was written by Chris Hewer for a presentation volume dedicated to Prof. Dr Christian Troll SJ to mark his seventieth birthday (*Im Dienst der Versöhnung: Für einen authentischen Dialog zwischen Christen und Muslimen*, (ed.) Peter Hünsele, Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2008). Prof. Troll has worked in the field of the study of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations since 1961. He studied in Germany, the Lebanon and Britain and subsequently taught in India, Britain, Italy, Turkey and his native Germany, where he is currently Honorary Professor at the Jesuit Theological Faculty in Frankfurt am Main. The article shows the methodology and structure of a course in the historical development of Islamic religious thought as taught by a Christian with a Muslim colleague to a group of Christian and Muslim students in a British university context. Four colleagues of ours at Selly Oak contribute their own reflections: the late Prof. Khalid Alavi from Pakistan, the Revd Gisela Egler from the Church of Hessen Nassau, Germany, the Revd Dr Herman Roborgh SJ from Sydney, Australia and Dr Ataullah Siddiqui from the Markfield Institute of Higher Education, Leicester

## **Troll in Selly Oak: teaching by example**

### **Introduction**

Christian Troll was present in the Selly Oak Colleges in May 1975 when the original consultation with leading Christians and Muslims took place that formulated the vision and launched the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations. By this time, he had completed his theological studies in Germany, his Arabic studies in Lebanon, his Persian and Urdu studies in London, and was completing his doctoral work on Sayyid Ahmad Khan. In 1976 he left for Delhi, where he taught at the Vidyajyoti Institute until his return to Selly Oak in 1988. During his five years at the Centre, in addition to supervising research, editing the Centre journal *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* that he began, consultations and occasional lectures, his principal teaching responsibility was the MA core course on the Historical Development of Islamic Religious Thought. When the MA was first developed in conjunction with the University of Birmingham, whose degree it was, the schema was to mirror a Master's degree in Christian theology, with one paper on scriptural material, one on systematic theology, an optional paper and a dissertation. The Troll course, which was first taught by the Centre's founder David Kerr, was the Islamic equivalent of a paper on systematic theology.

Anyone who sets out to teach a course on another faith takes on a monumental challenge, not least in the presumptions with which many students approach the subject. In his first year in Birmingham, in the first few weeks, I recall a student from the Yemen who attended the lectures and was predisposed to find fault with the way in which a Christian might speak about Islam. With patience, a command of the subject matter that demanded respect and by dint of many careful conversations, the same student became a fully paid up member of the "Troll fan club" before the end of the year.

Naturally a course develops over years of delivery, so by the time that it became known that Troll would leave the Centre at the end of March 1993, the course had taken a well defined shape. This paper concerns that “final” course that was given over two terms in the academic year 1992-3. The pattern was established that each week would see an introductory lecture in the morning followed by a textual seminar in the afternoon, in which one or more extracts from original sources, translated into English where necessary, were analysed and discussed as an exemplification of the topic of the week. Students were expected to have read around the topic from a bibliography supplied and to have made a careful study of the set text, so that the discussion could be properly informed. Knowing that this was the last opportunity to follow the course at Selly Oak, several people, me included, decided to join the class each week to “drink from the stream” before the source was taken from us.

By great good fortune, Professor Khalid Alavi was with us that year in the Centre. Alavi had memorised the Qur’an under the direction of his Qadariyya Shaykh father, before pursuing traditional studies in a number of *madrasas* in Pakistan. He then entered the prestigious Department of Islamic Studies at the University of the Punjab in Lahore, where he took Master’s degrees in Islamic Studies and Political Science, before being invited to join the staff, where he taught for ten years before moving to Edinburgh to write his doctoral thesis under Prof. Wm Montgomery Watt on the Forty Hadith of An-Nawawi. Upon his return to the University of the Punjab, he was appointed as Professor with special responsibility for the *Sirah*, the biographical studies of the Prophet Muhammad. In 1985, the President of Pakistan was asked to send a scholar as Director of Birmingham Central Mosque and Prof. Alavi was chosen for this role, on extended leave of absence from his job in Lahore. So it was that he was with us that year in the Centre. Here we see the Selly Oak Centre manifesting the spirit of the founding generation. The major course on the historical development of Islamic religious thought being taught by a Christian scholar, to a group of Muslim and Christian students, in the presence and with the active contribution of an internationally established Muslim scholar. The fact that both shared the common intellectual heritage of the Persian/Urdu world only added to the richness of the occasion.

### **The programme**

To understand the importance and to preserve it for future generations of students and teachers, there now follows an outline of the programme with the texts assigned for each seminar:

#### **Lecture 1:** Outlines: the nature of Islamic religious thought

Text: Watt, Wm M., *What is Islam?* Part I, Ch. I, “The nature of the vision”

**Lecture 2:** The environment of the origins of Islam: Arabia and the Middle East during the sixth and seventh centuries. Orientalist opinions on early influences on Islam.

Text: Lapidus, I. M., *A history of Islamic societies*, Ch. I, “Arabia”

**Lecture 3:** Muhammad and the Qur’an: early biography, first revelation, sequence and periods of revelation, the first Meccan period 610-615; teaching and impact.

**Lecture 4:** Muhammad and the Qur’an: the second Meccan period 615-619; setting, theological themes, earlier Prophets, the third Meccan period 619-622; lead up to the Hijra, social setting, major themes of the revelation.

Text: Jeffery, A. (ed), *Islam: Muhammad and his religion*, “The Qur’an on itself”, “On the eternal nature of the Word of Allah” (from an-Naisaburi: *Ghara’ib al-Qur’an*), “On the miraculous nature of the Qur’an” (from al-Baqillani: *I’jaz al-Qur’an*).

**Lecture 5:** Muhammad and the Qur’an: the Medinan period 622-632; Jihad and the Muslim State, socio-historical setting, doctrinal developments, major theological themes.

Text: *The Forty Hadith* of An-Nawawi.

**Lecture 6:** The first century after the death of Muhammad; earliest divisions in Islam, Four Rightly-Guided Caliphs, Umayyad Caliphate, the beginning of the Islamic sciences; Qur’an transmission and commentary, Hadith transmission, beginnings of *fiqh*, divisions into Kharijites, Shi’a and Sunnis.

Text: *The letter of al-Hasan al-Basri on Free Will and Predestination* and *al-Baghdadi on the law in practice and variation between the schools of law*.

**Lecture 7:** The birth of Islamic theology and the first doctrinal sects, theological problems posed; faith and works, the origin of the human act, the created/uncreated Qur’an, the sects; Qadarites, Jabarites, Murji’ites, outstanding personalities of the period, the problem of the influence of Christian theology on the birth of *kalam*.

Text: *A Shi’a creed from Allama Hasan ibn Yusuf al-Hilli* (d. 1326).

**Lecture 8:** The Mu’tazila: historical and cultural contexts, development of the schools, principal doctrines; Oneness of God, divine justice, promise and warning of the life to come, the situation of the grave sinner, the duty to command the good and forbid the evil, conflicts with other Muslim groups, reflections and assessment.

Text: *Fiqh Akbar I* (ca. 750) and *Wasiyat Abu Hanifa* (ca. 850).

**Lecture 9:** Ash’arism, Maturidism, Hanbalism: al-Ash’ari’s life, works, theological method, principal doctrines, assessment; al-Maturidi’s life, works, doctrines, impact; Hanbalism as a method and attitude in theology, sources, reason, moral and ethical attitude, politics.

Text: *A creedal statement by al-Maturidi*, and al-Ash'ari, *Kitab al-Lum'a*, and al-Juwayni, *A creedal statement dedicated to Nizam al-Mulk*.

**Lecture 10:** The chief Hanbalite authors: Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780-855), Abu Ya'la (d.1066), Ibn 'Aqil (d. 1119), Ibn Hazm (994-1063), Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328), Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350).

**Lecture 11:** Falsafa: Muslim philosophy and the response of al-Ghazali, al-Kindi (d. 870), al-Razi (865-926), al-Farabi (d. 950), Ibn Sina (980-1037), al-Ghazali's (d. 1111) critique, Ibn Rushd (d. 1198), al-Suhrawardi (d. 1191).

Text: Ibn Sina, "On the divisions of the rational sciences".

**Lecture 12:** Sufism, spiritual gnosis, folk religion: developments of Sufism, key figures, mystical literature, Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) and spiritual gnosis, folk religious elements.

Text: Al-Ghazali, *al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*, "Discussion of the ways of the Sufis", and "The true nature of prophecy and the need all men have for it".

**Lecture 13:** Pre-modernist reform, later Hanbalism, the Wahhabis: context, Ibn Taymiyya; theological concerns, polemics: against *wahdat al-wujud*, against the philosophers, against the Sufis, against speculative theologians, against the Shi'a. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792) and the Wahhabis.

Text: Michel, T., *A Muslim theologian's response to Christianity* (Ibn Taymiyya), Ch. 3, "The polemic against Sufis".

**Lecture 14:** The pre-modernist Islamic reform movements: Emperor Akhbar's (1556-1605) syncretistic tendency. Orthodox reformers: Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624), Shah Waliullah (1703-1764). Sufi reformers in Africa: Ahmad al-Tijani (1737-1815) and Muhammad ibn Ali al-Sanusi (1787-1859).

Text: Shah Waliullah, *Hujjat Allah al-Baligha*: "Fortifying the religion against distortion".

**Lecture 15:** The lives, thought and writings of Sayyid Jamaluddin al-Afghani (1838/9-1897) and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905).

Text: Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, *An Islamic response to Imperialism*, and *Islamic Solidarity*. Muhammad Abduh, *The Theology of Unity (Risala al-Tauhid)* extracts on: "Islam, Reason and Civilization", "The Possibility of Revelation", "Revelation and Mission in their actuality", and "The mission and message of Muhammad". Ali Abd al-Raziq, *The Caliphate and the bases of power*.

**Lecture 16:** A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology by Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898).

Text: Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Lecture on Islam*.

**Lecture 17:** The Turkish Experience: late Ottoman reforms, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938) and Zia Gökalp (1875-1924).

Text: Ziya Gökalp, *Islam and Modern Civilization*, Parts I and II.

**Lecture 18:** The Muslim Brotherhood: Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949) and Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966).

Text: Hasan al-Banna, *Message of the Teachings (Risalatut Ta'aleem)*, Parts I and II.

**Lecture 19:** Muhammad Iqbal (1875-1935): poet, philosopher and political thinker.

Text: Muhammad Iqbal, Poetry: *The Mosque of Cordoba*, *Lenin before God*, *God's command to his angels*, *The foundations of the Koranic world*. *The reconstruction of religious thought in Islam*, extracts on "The Fall of Man", "Man's Freedom and Responsibility", "The Principle of Movement in Islam", "Turkish Modernism and the Problem of the Caliphate", and "Ijma in Modern Islam". Plus letters between Iqbal and Jinnah.

**Lecture 20:** Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad (1888-1958): Islam lived and perceived from within a pluralistic nation and world.

Text: Abdul Kalam Azad, *Tarjuman al-Qur'an*, Vol. I, extracts on: "Divine providence", "Destiny", "Religion and reason", "Koranic transcendentalism", and "Koran and the human community".

**Lecture 21:** Abu'l A'la Maududi (1903-1979) and the Jama'at-i Islami.

Text: Abu'l A'la Maududi, *The necessity of divine governance for the elimination of oppression and injustice* and *The moral foundations of the Islamic movement*.

Ali Shari'ati, *Intizar, the religion of protest*, "Return to the self", and *Islamic governance*.

## Reflection

The fact that we can reassemble the course fifteen years later from lecture notes and study texts is an indicator that the course relied on the written word rather than the oratorical style of the teacher. This was important as many of the students were operating in a second, third or fourth language (as was the teacher!) and so needed the help of a written text fully to appreciate the material. The pedagogical method of a lecture that surveyed the area and put it into context, a text for study that exemplified the topic beyond the confines of the survey, plus a reading list for pre- and post-study, proved fruitful in helping students to stretch their perceived limits of understanding. The student groups could be divided into two categories: those who had been educated

according to European methods of study and those whose education had been in a more didactic eastern method. There were Muslims and Christians in both groups, as well as some secular students in the former. For the former group, especially those who had studied Christian theology, the method reflected a familiar pattern of systematic development in religious thought. For those in the latter group, there was importance in broadening out perspectives away from any narrowness that may have come from studying only one school of thought towards seeing a sequential development in religious thinking across the board in Islam. The rich diversity of material to which students were exposed, necessarily took them into the field of handling a range of opinions that were sometimes mutually contradictory. Topics and texts were juxtaposed in such a way that the richness of diversity was reinforced. The way that the scholars who were studied interacted with their historical contexts gave ground for thinking about how Islamic religious thought might further develop in new contexts in the future. This included dealing with various Christian and secular approaches to such controversial topics as the sources of the Qur'an and development of Islamic thought and practice. The very balance of the material, roughly in four parts, brought home the central theme of a developing tradition: Qur'an and Hadith; development of trends, schools and movements; the pre-modern period; and modern thought and writers.

**Scholarly collaboration:** Professor Dr Khalid Alavi writes...

After completing my doctoral studies in 1980, I came to Birmingham and stayed at the Sparkbrook Islamic Centre for a few months. I had the opportunity to attend the Summer School on Christian-Muslim relations at Selly Oak. Prof. Wm Montgomery Watt and Bishop Kenneth Cragg were among the speakers. It was an enriching experience. When I took charge of Birmingham Central Mosque as Director in 1985, the old associations were renewed. At the invitation of Dr David Kerr, the then Director of the Centre, I started part-time teaching. When my contract with Birmingham Central Mosque ended, I joined the Centre as a full-time teacher. It was in the 1992-93 session that I had the opportunity to participate in the teaching of the historical development of Islamic religious thought introduced by Christian Troll. Christian would distribute outlines of the lecture along with bibliography. My part was to give an input from an Islamic perspective, along with some additional comments. There were many questions from Christian and Muslim students, to which I could respond. I had been teaching Islamic Studies to MA classes for fifteen years but this was a unique experience. Organized and systematically arranged information based on authentic sources was presented. Wide-ranging reading lists were also provided. I heard, for the first time, a western scholar presenting Islamic thought in such a way that the whole picture would emerge in front of us. Of course it was taught in a western perspective, yet the objectivity was never lost. The most controversial issues in Kalam were discussed in such a scholarly manner that very few questions could be raised. It was always an intellectual feast. I remember we have more lively discussions on the modern developments in Islamic thought. Sayyid Ahmed Khan was his favourite and for me it was Mawdudi. The students benefited tremendously, but I as an associate member of this course was enriched myself. Christian was a hard working person, a genuine scholar and an exemplary teacher. His contribution to the academic

excellence of the Centre was much appreciated. I benefited immensely from this academic collaboration. After he left, I taught this course according to the outline prepared by Christian for two sessions. I found him kind and helpful in personal relations. Time spent in association with Christian is always remembered as a wonderful experience of a Christian-Muslim academic collaboration and personal friendship.

**From the students' perspective:** Pfrn. Gisela Egler MA writes...

After completing my studies in Protestant theology in Germany and Italy, and pastoral training near Frankfurt, my church, the Protestant Church of Hesse and Nassau, sent me to the Centre in Birmingham to learn more about Christian-Muslim dialogue. After consultation with people knowledgeable in the field, we decided that it would be best for me to join the MA course in Islamic Studies, because that would give me a broad view of the topic and best equip me for further engagement. So during 1990-91, I had the privilege of joining the course on the historical development of Islamic religious thought taught by Christian Troll, which proved to be a very important part of my education in the subject.

I must admit that the first lectures were really hard going for someone new to the field. Most of the names, thoughts and concepts I heard for the first time. Part of our task as students was to write essays on the topics dealt with in the lectures. Here I first started to recognize the real value of the lecture notes; being able to read them again and again, reading other material and slowly getting into the subject. After having worked and written on certain aspects, I recognized the depth of the lectures and more and more was able to appreciate them as they were delivered. In the following years the texts of his lectures proved to be my "source book" when I was confronted in seminars and dialogue meetings with questions of Islamic religious thought. For me these are not just written texts but are filled with experiences from the seminars with Christian Troll: discussions, confrontations, explanations, and all culminating in respect for one another.

In my year in Birmingham, I received many fragments that helped to build a mosaic of a new world. I started to learn how these pieces are part and parcel of the contexts of Muslims today and their impact on actual Christian-Muslim encounters. So much of what appeared as historical development was interwoven with relations with the non-Muslim world.

Knowing that Christian Troll likes Italian cuisine, I want to compare the taste of his course with the artistry of a real tomato sauce. A tomato sauce has certain ingredients and needs hours of slow cooking; that gives the sauce its enhanced rich taste. The ingredients of Christian Troll's lectures were a profound and wide knowledge of the subject, deep reflection and respect for the issues he taught, seeing them as something that guided and guides peoples' lives, being prepared to tackle controversial issues, and not least the whole sauce was flavoured with the spice that the study of the historical development of Islamic religious thought helps us to understand the contemporary world. One can imagine what a wonderful taste this makes!

**Support for Christian students:** Dr Herman Roborgh SJ writes...

Soon after arriving from Pakistan to join the M.A. year in 1991, I found myself in the same Jesuit community as Fr. Christian Troll S.J. Before long, I started attending lectures on the history of Islam taught by Christian. It took me only a few days to realize how fortunate I was to have such a direct link with my teacher. His cheerful presence at meals often led to more serious discussions that were truly fascinating. Christian had a way of making Islamic history come alive. He would have stories from his personal experience of Christian-Muslim relations in many countries. His sincere respect for Muslims would be obvious to everyone around the table but he was never afraid to open up the more difficult issues in the dialogue between Christians and Muslims. I would always walk away from these dinner table discussions with new questions. I would look forward to the next opportunity to engage Christian on one or other of the many issues that Christians and Muslims had debated for centuries. As a student of Islam in Birmingham, I had found a wonderful resource person in Christian who was always ready to share his knowledge and reflections with others.

Christian was especially concerned to enable his own students to reflect on their faith at a time when they were delving into the faith of their Muslim brothers and sisters. He was aware that some of these students might not have enough theological background to reflect on the issues that were emerging in their study of Islamic history and theology. His concern was that some students might not be able to understand why these issues were so important or that they might find it difficult to appreciate why these issues were relevant even today. Christian felt that the study of Islamic history was not merely of academic interest but was related to issues of Christian life in the contemporary world. He was always looking for ways to find possible connections between his lectures and the Christian-Muslim encounters his students experienced in their own lives. He would try to bring out the implications that his lectures might have for future encounters with Muslim brothers and sisters.

One of the ways Christian tried to do this was to organize “Sunday sessions” at Manresa, the name of the Jesuit house in Birmingham. During these sessions, his students were invited to share their responses to what they were hearing and reading. Christian would listen and respond in his own characteristic way, which was to stimulate further discussion and to encourage more profound reflection. These gatherings provided a safe environment in which we could ask the probing questions that Muslims and Christians had asked throughout the centuries and which even today can cause shock and division. Christian created a space in which we could articulate our more personal difficulties and struggles. I remember these sessions as an opportunity to share and to discuss how the study of Islam was changing our own self-understanding as believers. The sessions helped us to build a kind of bridge between our Christian faith and Islam. Crossing over this bridge and coming back again awakened in us a fresh awareness of being believers alongside our Muslim brothers and sisters.



**Doctoral supervision:** Dr Ataullah Siddiqui writes...

Christian Troll was a familiar name in South Asian Academic and Religious Circles. I heard about him while I was in India. On occasional visits to Delhi I was encouraged by others to meet him, but it never materialised. I finally met him in 1988 in the Summer School organised by the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations (CSIC) at the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham. After attending a workshop we had a brief conversation during the break. I remember speaking with him both in English and Urdu on the issues raised in the workshop. We met again on several other occasions. This was a time when the idea of writing a PhD thesis was brewing in my mind, and this gave me an opportunity to discuss some of the themes with him.

The following year I had submitted my proposal for a PhD programme on ‘Christian-Muslim Relations’ which was accepted by the University of Birmingham, and Christian Troll was assigned as my supervisor. This appointment practically meant that we were locked in a perpetual dialogue.

This dialogue had different dimensions. As far as writing chapters were concerned I had the privilege to discuss the issues much more widely. He would listen patiently and give his comments, and advise me what he thought should be done. Our discussions sometimes covered many wider issues which were not the immediate focus of my thesis, but which generated much interest in my post-doctoral years. I believe his experience of living and working with Muslims in India, and mine as a Muslim working with Christians in the foothills of the Himalayas, automatically generated a curious connection with each other.

Christian Troll had an inquisitive nature regarding his students. He would occasionally invite them for lunch or tea and have a long chat with them. While on the one hand he would then understand a student better academically, on the other a student would see a pastoral side of him, a caring and counselling person. In my case this experience has helped me considerably in my difficult years of being a student again.

He has encouraged me, and I believe others too, to take part in seminars, but he initiated a number of informal discussion groups while he was at Selly Oak. One such group met regularly on Wednesday evenings in a nearby hostel assigned to post-doctoral visitors. This was attended by some of the students who were doing PhD, post-doctoral fellows and some of the staff. Though the discussion was informal and generated intense debate on issues ranging from Christian and Islamic theology to contemporary socio-political situations, in the end the group would come up with some themes that needed to be explored the following week. Such informal gatherings were very valuable for all concerned.

Finally he decided to move on, and in 1993 the Centre gave him a farewell dinner. He was asked to say something, which he did, but he also chose a few couplets from the Urdu poet Iqbal which he read passionately in Urdu:

There are other universes beyond the Stars  
There are other trials of *ishq* (Love) ahead !

### **Closing word**

In beginning the conclusion to this Festschrift article, it is my pleasure to acknowledge the generosity of the four friends from Selly Oak, who each in their own way has written a reflection on the contribution of Christian Troll to the life and work of the Centre. For me there are three themes that run through this account: humanity, scholarship and faith. I recall my own words at the farewell party in 1993, to which reference has already been made. “When we heard that a great German Jesuit scholar of Islam was to join the Centre, we expected to find an intimidating intellectual presence, distant and reserved. Instead we have experienced a man of great humility, human warmth and camaraderie, with a profound scholarly grasp of the subject and a deep sense of being on the journey of faith into the loving embrace of the One.” The academic contribution made by Christian Troll to the work of the Centre is evident in what has been written. Like all good educational encounters, lives are transformed through the dynamic of students with their teacher. The fact that the lecture notes and texts act as a “source book” for a generation, and that anyone planning a course on the historical development of Islamic religious thought has a model in these pages from which to begin, speaks of a scholarly yield as yet not fully harvested. The encounter of both Christian and Muslim students with a man of faith deepened that commitment to follow the divine invitation no matter what the cost. May we prove worthy of the planting!