The training of Christian workers to engage in dialogue with Islam
Experiences and impulses for the future
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This paper is offered as advance preparation for the CIBEDO Tagung: Der Islam als Herausforderung für die theologische Ausbildung (24-25 October 2014). Selected themes will be taken for oral presentation but the paper as a whole will be assumed to have been read. The diagrammes, lists, references and statistics will not be available on the day except in this paper, which it is assumed the participants will bring with them to the Tagung.

Out of what experience do I speak?

I have worked in the field of Christian-Muslim relations for nearly thirty years, following a wide-ranging Christian theological education, with teachers and books from various confessions, and including some years of study of Islamic religious thought, with particular concentration on Muslim education in Britain and modern Muslim thought. During the last two decades, I have focussed on developing and running courses at the level of adult popular education on Understanding Islam, predominantly for Christians but with widespread Muslim attendance, as well as participants from other faiths and those without a religious background. This took various forms but particularly a course of twenty hours duration, which I have delivered more than one hundred and fifty times to thousands of participants around Britain but mainly in Birmingham and Greater London. I want to argue that a diverse Christian theological education is important in this work for two reasons: first, it enables the teacher to help Muslims to appreciate the variety of Christian theological approaches, and second, because the teacher who has made this journey becomes a bridge of understanding, who is well equipped to help others to make the same journey and to reflect with Christian students on the challenges that this places on their Christian faith and understanding.

The exploration of another faith necessary raises questions in the mind of the student: Is this element of Islam similar to or the same as my Christian understanding? If there are differences, are they important? If they are important, then why are they important for me as a Christian and how should I respond to the challenge that this makes to me both in terms of understanding and in dialogue with Muslims? My own approach is to prompt questions in the minds of participants and then address them as they arise, rather than a more didactic approach of raising the questions explicitly and drawing them to the attention of students. This is a question of pedagogical approach: I want to encourage reflection and exemplify methods of dealing with questions. I favour this pedagogy rather than a more apologetic one, which can give rise to the assumption that Christians study Islam in order to counter its theological propositions. My approach then is one of honest exploration of Islam as another faith tradition under God, hence the reason that I place my work under the general title of "Understanding Islam" (this emphasis will be explored in more detail subsequently).

Why should contemporary European Christians be engaged in the work of "Understanding Islam"?

The worldwide population of Muslims is going through a period of expansion due to a demographic imbalance towards youth. In many Muslim communities around the world, something of the order of two-thirds of Muslims are aged under thirty years. Such an age profile is bound to mean further expansion in the next few decades. This is a situation that touches all Christian churches in Europe, which I exemplify with reference to Britain, which alone in Europe collects voluntary religious identity data in its ten-yearly census. The number of those declaring themselves to be Muslim in 2011 was 2.79m being 4.8% of the total population. This was an increase of 70% from 2001. The age breakdown is revealing:
In the total population: 31% aged 0-24, 35% 25-49, 18% 50-64, 16% 65+
In Muslim population: 48% aged 0-24, 40% 25-49, 8% 50-64, 4% 65+
% declared no religion: 39% aged 0-24, 42% 25-49, 13% 50-64, 6% 65+
In Christian population: 26% aged 0-24, 31% 25-49, 21% 50-64, 22% 65+
It is significant to note that 4.8% of the UK population is Muslim but 9.1% of babies born in the UK are Muslim. The figures for Germany might well differ but I suspect that a similar trend might be evident.

No theology is ever done in a vacuum. All theology takes place within a certain context: temporal, political, philosophical, linguistic, geographic, historic etc. The contemporary context of Western Europe is secular, multicultural and multireligious. We can no longer do theology in Europe without taking into consideration the context of Christians from many different cultures in our communities and as well as globally. Religions, such as Islam, are no longer part of a distant mission field but they are part of the streets on which we live. The geopolitical and economic situation of the world must surely influence us, as must the crisis of climate change and global survival. Developments in medical science, gene manipulation, beginning and end of life issues, and care for the elderly all make challenges for theological reflection. World population expansion, equitable distribution of resources and their impact on world peace… the list could go on. In all our contexts: community, city, regional, national and international, the nature of life today is that religions live side-by-side to a greater extent than ever before in human history. We need to ask ourselves: Why has it pleased God to bring about such diversity and interconnectedness? Can Christian theology be done now in a monoreligious context or do we need to find ways of opening our theological discourse to other faiths at every level (see the second "way of proceeding" outlined in the "Islam in Europe" report mentioned at the conclusion of this paper)? On the level of social theology, this goes right down to the neighbourhoods in which we live. In my view, we in Europe are embarked on the greatest unplanned social experiment of the last five-hundred years; we have no pre-existing plan from which we can draw and there is a possibility that things could go horribly wrong. Christianity and Islam in dialogue need to ask if we have anything to contribute to this situation or if the secularists have it right and we are only a cause of division and indeed hatred.

Pastoral matters

One of the serious pastoral matters for which training is needed is in marriage preparation. Christian-Muslim marriages, in which one or both partners are actively committed to their faith and practice, need some careful thinking through in advance and support as the years go by. In my experience, these are not questions that should be left until two people are in love and considering a life together but rather the questions should be thought through before people are involved in partner selection. In Britain, a mutual support network exists on the internet run by people in such marriages, who are willing to share their experience for the benefit of others (www.interfaithmarriage.org.uk). Obvious questions include the permanence and exclusivity of marriage, religious identity and upbringing of children, relations with both extended families, celebration of festivals, dietary requirements and hospitality at home, expectations of dress and conduct, and the marriage ceremony itself. It is not unknown that people who are "secular" at the time of marriage become more religious at some later stage in their lives.

Relatively small but significant numbers of Europeans are converting to Islam and embracing an Islamic way of life. In my experience, far fewer Muslims are becoming Christians. Accompanying people who are considering conversion in either direction is an acute pastoral need. It often involves relations between the person and their extended family and community; in the case of close-knit families/communities, this can be a critical question requiring careful handling. It was relatively common in my experience of running Understanding Islam courses that someone would declare privately that their son/daughter had become a Muslim, was considering it or was forming a relationship with a Muslim. Often such parents are committed to finding out more so that they do not lose touch with their daughter/son. It was also not uncommon that converts or those born Muslim but whose faith had awakened in adulthood came along to Understanding Islam courses to learn something more about their new faith delivered pedagogically in a way that they find more digestible. It can be much less threatening to ask a Christian about Islam than to ask a Muslim teacher, whose approach might be much more directive towards a particular form of Islamic understanding. Amongst the thousands who have undertaken Understanding Islam courses, no-one has ever declared to me that they now intend to convert to Islam! By contrast, it was ubiquitous that Christians were brought to a deeper understanding of their Christianity by studying another faith tradition.

Various pastoral issues arise in the context of education. There can be Muslim children in church-based kindergartens or schools. How is their faith development to be supported and practice facilitated? What is their relationship to elements of Christian practice in the school or kindergarten? What kind of an understanding of Christianity will they imbibe from the way that the school conducts itself? How are Christian children in religious education lessons, confirmation classes or youth groups to gain an understanding of Islam and be trained to form relations with their Muslim co-citizens? How are they to be facilitated to be able to articulate their Christian belief and practice to Muslim friends? How might events like Open Days for mosques

and churches be made positive learning experiences for all concerned? Could there be more regular joint programmes between Muslim and Christian youth groups? What about some people equipping themselves to do adult popular education in both directions between Christianity and Islam?

Increasingly matters arise in the field of specialist chaplaincies: hospital, prison, military and university. Are chaplains only there for their confessional groups or should they offer spiritual and pastoral support for everyone who asks? It is often in the case of hospital chaplaincy that questions of praying for/with someone of another faith can arise. Can a Christian hospital visitor pray aloud for a Muslim patient using words that do not offend Muslim faith so that the patient can add their "amen" at the end? Do we need to provide resources of suitable readings or prayers that could be used in such situations? Can we devise prayers that both can own and pray together? Is that desirable? How can we accommodate Muslim patients as guests at Christian worship in the hospital or other context? What are the limits of participation? How do we advise and train multi-faith chaplaincy teams about meeting together as a team to make intercessory prayer for people in their pastoral care? How are Christians attending Muslim formal prayers advised to conduct themselves and what are the limits of participation?

As one person of faith and practice seeking to enter into dialogue with another, we can learn much through observation and engagement. What is the relationship with God that is expressed by the Muslim at *salat*, the climax of which is to lay the forehead and hands on the floor before God in total submission, love and obedience? Could this be the epitome of the Christian relationship with God expressed bodily in prayer? We will be aware of the criticism of the Eastern Church that western Christians do not correctly express the Christian relationship with God through their kneeling; rather we should stand erect as befits adopted sons and daughters before the Father.

What might we have to explore in terms of an integrated spirituality with Islam, in which the spiritual adept is a family person, earning a living and raising children, rather than the inhabitant of a religious cloister? How does our dialogue handle an understanding of the religious law (*shari'a*) as God's greatest blessing to humankind because it teaches them how to live out the way of Islam in practice and liberates them from sin, rather than a much more negative understanding of religious law post-St Paul (and especially post-Luther and the "children of the sixty-eight generation")? This is especially important when we consider that Islam has no doctrine of Original Sin; therefore the human being can "save themselves" through correct living (as Plato taught, we can educate people to goodness without the need of a "Saviour"). How can we facilitate the dialogue of life and social action through joining forces with Muslim charities or campaigning groups to seek to promote justice and peace in the world?

Death is an inevitable part of life and thus questions around burials and funerals must be considered. Is it permissible for a Muslim to be buried in a church cemetery? Does it make a difference if they just happen to live in the area, if they were active members of church-related activities or if they were married to a Christian partner,

who intends to be buried there? If a Muslim dies and their Christian partner or parent asks the church to conduct a suitable funeral service, how might one respond? This is particularly common in cases where the dead Muslim's faith identity was clear but not extrovert. What might be suitable prayers, readings, and gestures for such a service? Might it be possible to ask a mosque imam, Muslim elder or family member to take some formal part? How might on-going pastoral support for the bereaved be arranged?

What does it mean, "to understand" another faith tradition?

As a Christian, I want to argue that my Christianity comprises a way of life and not a set of religious practices. It shapes my relationship with God, my understanding of my own nature and being, my relationship with my fellow human beings and the whole created order, my ethical practice, my spirituality, the kind of work that I do and the way that I relate to believers on other faith journeys. Manifestly, this is not something that can be understood just by the accumulation of intellectual knowledge but requires also experience in the affective domain, seeking to understand what it is to live the whole of one's life out of this consciousness. All this can be said in equal measure of Muslims living out their Islam.

Understanding another faith then requires both intellectual understanding and also intuitive understanding; understanding both of the head and of the heart. It requires more yet because a faith tradition is a path of spirituality, therefore I need to weigh the spirit that is at work in my Muslim fellow-believer and allow it to speak to my own spirit. This means that the goal of such understanding is not only to know what the other believes and why they believe it but also feel what it must be like to live this way of Islam. The students need to be brought to a state of thinking, feeling and indeed believing like a Muslim if they are fully "to understand" Islam and the way that it shapes Muslim lives. They need to learn to see the world through Muslim eyes. Understanding is not the same as agreeing; I can understand how a young mother, driven to lose control by her baby's constant demands and crying, suddenly hits the child – this does not mean that I agree that this is a good path to follow in parenting.

How can a Christian come to experience the lived reality of being a Muslim? It is helpful here to understand Islam through the Muslim perception of it being the natural way of life for all human beings (*din al-fitra*). This hinges on the understanding that God has been revealing in essence the same message through all the prophets and books that have been sent to humankind: as the Qur'an puts it, "no people has been left without guidance" and that guidance is consistent from the time of Adam onwards. The Islam as revealed through the Qur'an and Muhammad is the last and final edition of this constant message, which was sent, amongst many others, to Abraham, Moses and Jesus. This means that any human being, on hearing the authentic message of Islam as conveyed in the Qur'an and teaching of Muhammad, should find that it "rings true" or finds a reverberation in the heart of the hearer. This shapes our teaching and understanding. We need to move beyond "this is what Muslims do" to the perception that "this is God's guidance for all human beings."

When reflecting on Muslim prayer, fasting or modesty, for example, we need to ask: How is the human relationship with God enhanced by a regular rhythm of prayer punctuating the whole day? How does a communal period of fasting develop a sense of being part of one human family, sharing the good gifts of God and growing in self-discipline through taking control of our basic human urges for food, drink and sex? How is the human condition ennobled by respect for our own bodies and conduct through modesty of speech, thought, action and dress? When teaching about modesty in Islam, for example, it is not my purpose to explain Muslim dress code but rather to use this as a means of exploring human dignity and the kind of life and society that promotes this.

We need to distinguish two distinct dimensions of understanding Islam; the first, from the position of being a Christian and the second, as Muslims understand it. As a Christian, I of necessity do not see things in the same way as a Muslim. There are contradictory central elements of fact, e.g., the death and resurrection to eternal life of Jesus, and of belief, e.g., in a trinitarian understanding of God and in the centrality of the incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus. In this way, it is not possible for me as a Christian to believe in Islam as does a Muslim without contradicting my own faith. This means that I cannot accept the Muslim belief in the Qur'an as the last, direct, verbally revealed word of God that comes to correct errors that have come into the earlier true revelations that were sent to Moses and Jesus. It also means that I cannot accept the prophethood of Muhammad as the sinless, infallible bearer of the last and definitive revelation and the perfect exemplar of a godly way of life.

As a trained academic, I am bound to seek other explanations of these key Muslim elements. In response to the often put question from Muslims: "As a Muslim, I am bound to accept the prophethood of Jesus, why can't you accept the prophethood of Muhammad?" My answer has to be that I cannot accept him as Muslims do otherwise I would be a Muslim, so better to ask: "What can you say as a Christian of Muhammad?" Similarly: "What can you say as a Christian of the Qur'an?" There is a range of understandings on these matters held by different Christians and we are entitled to work out our own responses. On the question of the prophethood of Muhammad, for example, some Christian scholars have used a religious studies definition of "prophethood" and affirmed that Muhammad meets these criteria. Other Christian scholars use the device that "Muhammad was a prophet but Jesus is much more than that." Still other Christian scholars use a Christian biblical definition of prophethood, that the prophets point forward to the coming of Christ and therefore would not accept the prophethood of Muhammad. This points to the crucial need to define terms before transposing them from one theological system to another. My own practice is not simply to transpose such technical terms but rather to speak descriptively, so, for example, to say that Muhammad was "the bearer of the spirit of prophecy" as was, in our own times, Martin Luther King, Ghandi, Oscar Romero or Mother Teresa. This is on the first dimension of understanding Islam from a Christian perspective.

On the second dimension, of understanding Islam as Muslims do, we need to take a different approach, in which our own Christian position and judgement is temporarily suspended. I spend part of my time helping Muslims to understand Christianity and I have to ask them to suspend their assumption that they know better what Jesus taught than I do as a Christian (as above: it was based on essentially the same guidance as was sent to Muhammad) because this will never lead them to understand Christianity as Christians do. They need to enter into a Christian paradigm of Christianity if they wish to understand it. Indeed it annoys me to be told what I believe by a Muslim in a way that I do not recognise as having any relationship to Christian faith as I know and believe it. The dictum of Jesus, "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you" applies in that I need to seek to understand Islam as I would have Muslims seek to understand my Christian faith. As with all things in the Christian ethic, it is not based on the principle of reciprocity but on the principle of unrequited gift. It is irrelevant to me whether or not a Muslim seeks to understand Christianity this way, my duty is to obey the command of Jesus and take the initiative in thus understanding. Not to do so, not only offends Muslims but also offends this basic command of my Master.

We are the prisoners of history and our understanding of Islam needs to be within the context in which we live but also in an historical context. No-one has anything to teach European Christians about failure to live according to the high ideals that we preach. When I teach about Christianity, I want often to say: "Look at the ideals and do not just be absorbed in the sordid realities of the ways that Christians have failed to live up to them." This distinction between ideals and realities applies equally to Muslims and Islam. We do not know how sordid the realities are until we appreciate the ideals below which they fall. We must seek always to avoid the double-standards of comparing "my wonderful ideals" with "your sordid realities." We live at a time when there are many unislamic acts performed by extremist Muslims in the name of Islam that have no justification in the ideal schema of Islam and part of our responsibility as Christian workers in this dialogue is to help people to see extremists for what they are.

If I survey the last fifty years of Christian ecumenism in Britain, then we have moved from an avoidance of the other, and indeed a denial of the true Christian faith that they follow, to a recognition of the light of Christ in the lives of Christians of other confessions. To a certain extent, this has come about through an academic reappraisal of theology but the major driving force was personal encounter between people of different confessions and the recognition that the same Spirit lives in and invigorates us all. The same must occur in our study of Islam; we need to know Muslims as fellow believers under God and this can only come about through personal encounter. One of the geniuses of my own *alma mater* in Islamic studies, the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at Selly Oak, Birmingham, was that every course had Muslim and Christian students studying alongside one another, often with Muslim and Christian teachers sharing seminars. One of the remarkable elements in the more than one hundred courses that I taught in London was that almost every course had Muslim participants. For me, it was a point of honour and fidelity to the

Truth that the course did not change by one word because there were Muslims present. It was not uncommon, and still prevails in some contexts, that Christians teaching other Christians about Islam speak in disparaging ways about "them" because "they" are not present. Our ethic should be to assume the "invisible Muslim" in the seminar consisting only of Christians so that educated Muslims would recognise that their faith is being taught and discussed in a way that they would recognise and with which they would be happy.

As we meet in a Jesuit House of Studies, two impulses from St Ignatius can serve to conclude this section. First, that we must "imagine ourselves into" that which we are seeking to understand and experience in our study of Islam, and second, that we must "seek always to put the best possible interpretation on the actions of others;" this is rather what I hope that God will do for me on the Day of Judgement!

A paradigm shift

In order for Christians to understand Islam, they need to position Islam within an Islamic paradigm, which, I argue, is significantly different from a Christian paradigm. Without this paradigm shift, no real understanding is possible. To begin with, we need to work out the Christian paradigm within which we understand Christianity, bearing in mind that different Christians and various Christian confessions might draw a somewhat different paradigm.

This is not a simple task because most of us have not been trained to think in this way. By so doing, we can begin to appreciate the singularity of the Christian paradigm. I invite you now to attempt to sketch out your own understanding of such a Christian paradigm and then to reflect on it in the light of my own attempt which follows.

My hope would be that you might like to re-draw elements of your paradigm after the encounter with Islam because I want to propose the thesis that one of the consequences of studying another faith is that it helps us to sharpen our perception of our own faith, its uniqueness and why that matters so much.

A Christian paradigm

God	Word of God	Jesus
	creation	Word Incarnate
	prophets	Revelation of God
	Law	Sonship
	every individual	fullness of humanity
	Reception through H Spt	fullness of divinity
	Prophetic community	Obedient to point of death

adoption	transformation
faith	community
baptism	prayer
new creation	discipleship and service
"resurrection life"	sacrifice/cross
	Spirit filled
	sacraments
	love and grace
	changed perception from death to life

| adopted sonship	union with God
alter Christi	realised and awaited
co-heirs of the Kingdom	taken up into the fellowship of the
"first-born of many	Trinity through the portal of the
brothers and sisters"	second *hypostasis* by the power of
	the Holy Spirit

Islam is also diverse, so let me now share two Muslim paradigms; one Sunni and the other Shi'a, so that we can begin to consider the paradigm shift involved.

A Sunni Paradigm of Islam
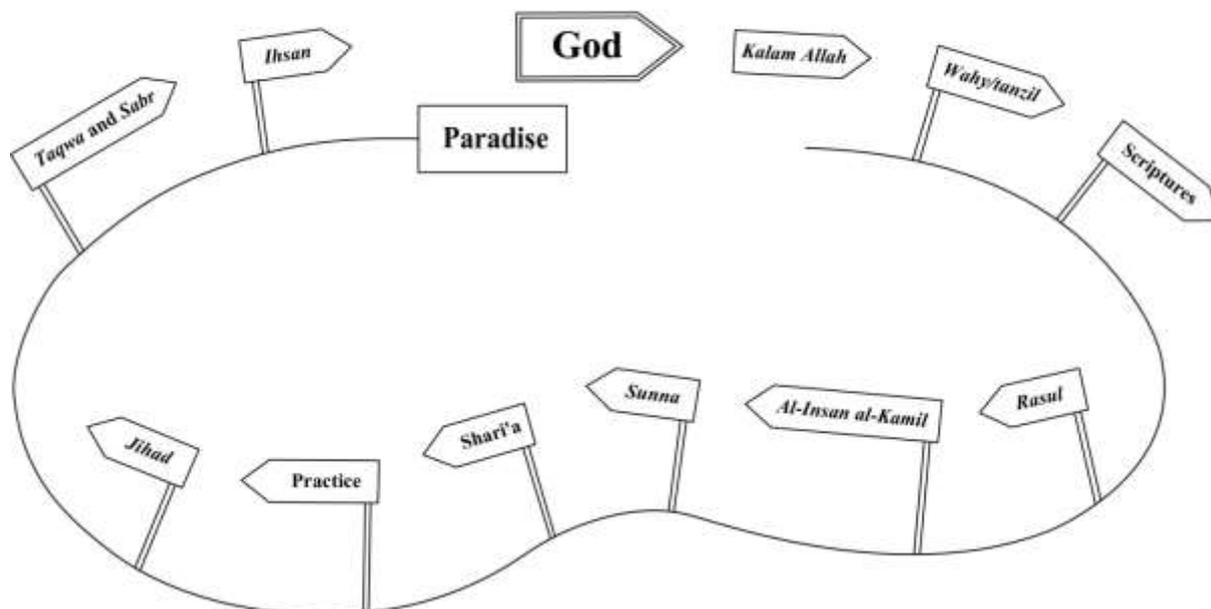
The paradigm begins with the transcendent God, who speaks the speech/word of God (*kalam allah*), that is sent down (*wahy/tanzil*) as a literal, verbal revelation, which is contained in the scriptures, the last of which is the Qur'an. This was received by Muhammad (*rasul*) as a passive recipient, who is the perfect human being (*al-insan al-kamil*) and who lives it out in the best possible way (*sunna*). The Qur'an and the *sunna* become the foundation sources of the way of life (*shari'a*), which Muslims put into practice through struggling (*jihad*) in a godly way. By so doing, they build up the twin cardinal virtues of God-consciousness (*taqwa*) and patience (*sabr*) until they reach the state of living constantly as though in the presence of God (*ihsan*), which after death leads them into being near God or living permanently in the presence of God in Paradise.

Notice that:
- God remains totally other and even in Paradise the human being is encamped, as it were, in the foothills of the holy mountain of God's presence.
- There is no salvation motif: the human being, following Plato, is educated out of wrong-doing by following the divine guidance and has the capacity to live it out and thus attain virtue.
- The spiritual journey of Muslims is *imitatio Muhammadi* in all things and thus, as it were, performing their own ascent (*mir'aj*) into the divine court, as did Muhammad.

A Shi'a Paradigm of Islam
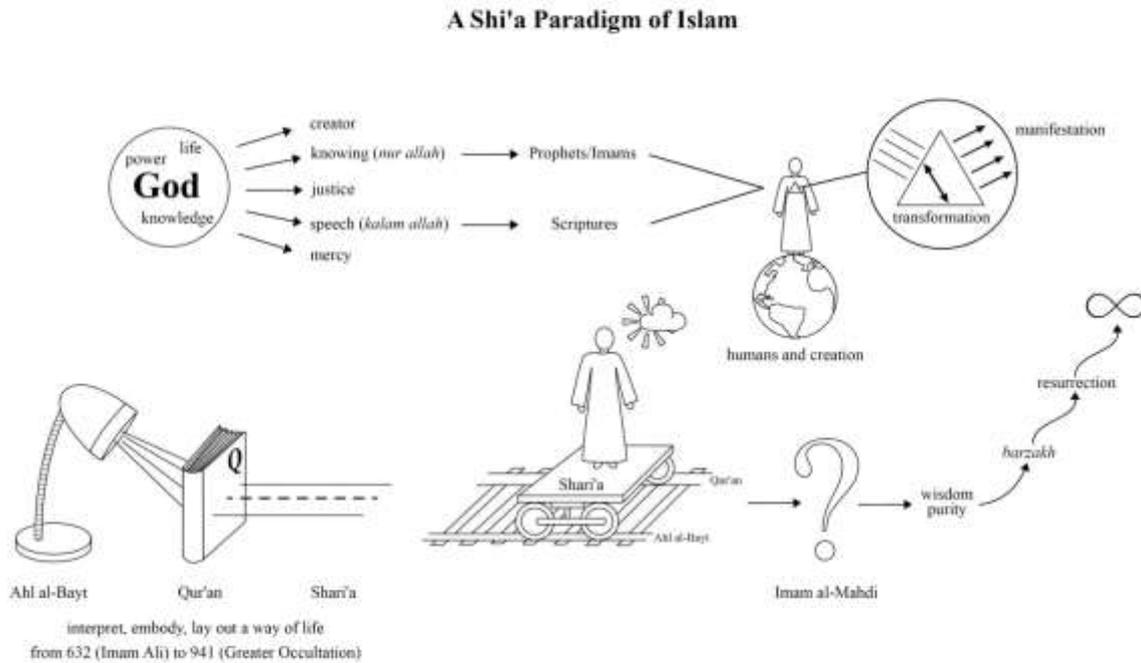
The Shi'a paradigm begins again with the transcendent, eternal God, who eternally possesses the attributes of life, power and knowledge. Once God begins to act by creating the creation, there come into being relational attributes, such as mercy and justice. Now we can speak of God as not only possessing knowledge but as knowing (an act) and thus this knowing is conveyed through the light of God (*nur allah*), which rests in the hearts of all Prophets from Adam to Muhammad and all Imams, culminating in the Imams who succeeded Muhammad, the line of Twelve. Parallel to this knowing is the communication of God through speech (*kalam allah*), which is conveyed through the scriptures, culminating in the Qur'an. These two attributes work on the heart of human beings (and through them all creation) bringing about a transformation through purity and wisdom, so that the human being manifests the attributes of God. The Prophet is one who manifests most perfectly all the divine attributes. God has designated the line of the twelve Imams after Muhammad (*Ahl al-Bayt*), who are impeccable and thus infallible and thus shine a light of divine guidance and inspiration on the Qur'an, so as to interpret it in a privileged way and to embody it, thus laying down a path through life to be followed (*shari'a*). This *shari'a* becomes the vehicle of transformation for the believer. It runs on two tracks that must never separate: the Qur'an and the *Ahl al-Bayt*, under the ever-present Hidden Imam (the sun hidden behind the cloud), until the time of the return of the Twelfth Imam as Imam al-Mahdi, who will purge the world of sin and guide humankind on the path of purity and wisdom. This path continues in the life after death (*barzakh*), until we come to the General Resurrection and Day of Judgement, after which the people of Paradise will continue eternally to grow in purity and wisdom, coming ever closer to but never reaching the infinite goal of God.

"Are we expected to grasp all that?" you may ask. That is not the point. The critical thing is to see the comprehensive nature of the paradigm shift involved in moving from a Christian to a Muslim model of God's relationship with humanity and thus the task involved in trying to understand Islam as Muslims understand it. This task is made even more difficult when we compare the Sunni and the Shi'a paradigms (and we could draw others) and see how different they are. At one level, Islam is one, based on the Qur'an and Muhammad; this is equivalent to saying that Jesus Christ founded the one Christian Church. It would be ridiculous to say that all Christians believe the same things, worship in the same way and express this faith in identical practices. Islam is no less a diverse way of life. There are only two statements of beliefs on which we can say that all Muslims agree (the *shahada:* I bear witness that there is no god but God Muhammad is the Messenger of God), after that comes diversity. An understanding of this diversity needs to be factored into our preparation for dialogue with Muslims.

Not only do we have the two traditions of Sunni and Shi'a interpretation but within each there are varieties of schools, and within these schools, different emphases of practice. Within the Shi'a tradition, we need to distinguish Ithna 'Ashari and Isma'ili forms, as well, perhaps, as the Zaydi. We also need to distinguish those religious traditions that derive at least part of their origin from Islam: Alawites, Druse, Aleviten and Ahmadiyya. Differences take a different form within the Sunni tradition with those who emphasise mystical dimensions, the on-going traditional forms of village Islam, urban book-based Islam, politically engaged Islam seeking an Islamic state, modernist forms of Islam, more puritanical reform movements, groups who want to return to the most primitive interpretations of Islam and those for whom Islam is a cultural expression rather than a system of faith and practice. This is just a simplified modern snap-shop but it does not address historical diversity or development. Part of the genius of the Selly Oak course in Islamic studies was a major element called the historical development of Islamic religious thought, which aimed to plot diversity in history (see one form of this course as taught by Christian Troll in my article: *Troll at Selly Oak*, which can be downloaded from my website).

Dealing with diversity in theology, spirituality and practice is never easy. We have to consider how we discuss and explain Christian confessions other than our own before we can turn to Islam. How do we then help people to distinguish and understand differences within the worldwide Muslim community (*umma*); these intra-Muslim differences can be as unresolvable and deep as those within Christianity. There is often a tendency to want to engage with the kind of Muslims with whom we are at ease, as if to say "if only all Muslims were like you!" With which kind of Muslims do we want to enter into dialogue: the sophisticated university professor of Islamic studies or some other discipline, the serious Muslim who sees everything in terms of law, the official representatives of Islam in Germany, the person whose Islam is basically a cultural expression, the sufi who sees everything in mystical terms or the ordinary believer that we might meet on an apartment block staircase or queuing to be served at the market stall? Politicians often speak of talking to "moderate Muslims"

as a way of reaching the masses but who are these "moderate Muslims?" Do they have any real following within Muslim communities? One Muslim adviser to the British government drew a graph of Muslim leaders showing "degrees from liberal to extreme" and "following amongst Muslims"; not surprisingly, both extremes had few followers but the active "conservative" mainstream had a huge following by comparison. This must act as an indicator not just to seek out dialogue partners from a liberal/progressive/comfortable wing. The same is true of organisations claiming to speak for Muslims, whether self-constituted or created by government activity; just how "representative" are they? By way of example: the British government in the 19th century recognised the office of the Chief Rabbi as an interlocutor with Jews – but he is the Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue, one branch of Orthodox Judaism, and has no representative role for Sephardic, Masorti, Reform or Hasidic Jews. At the same period, the Board of Deputies of British Jews was self-constituted by representatives of all the various strands but still only represents synagogue-affiliated Jews.

Having a real grasp of this diversity is particularly crucial in our times for four reasons. First, it equips us to see the huge breadth of legitimate diversity, which enables us to recognise extremism when it is encountered. Second, it would not be an exaggeration to say that we are living through times of "a battle for the soul of Islam" around the world and we have a duty to help others to understand what is happening. Third, throughout Islamic history, the traditional way for a scholar to sign off their work was to say: "This is what X thinks but God knows best," now everyone seems to want to speak in the name of Islam: "This is what Islam says (and I know best!)." This tendency has been hugely compounded in the last decade by ready access to the internet from which people can access all manner of material that claims to be Islamic but much of which is written from a particular position of propaganda, which does not proclaim itself as such but claims to speak in the name of "authentic Islam." It is from this source that many young Muslims obtain their (unbalanced) understanding of Islam (we speak often of "Mufti Google"!). Fourth, our dialogue with Islam and Muslims can never be neutral but is orientated in particular ways. One such orientation is to encourage the development of a form of Islam in Europe that contributes to the up-building of a godly harmonious society in which all communities can share. From the Muslim perspective, this is not an easy or obvious path of development and perhaps in our dialogue we have a responsibility to help open up interpretations of Islam that better contribute in this direction.

One of the critical developments in Islamic thought and practice in the West (and other parts of the world) in recent decades has been the emergence of women Muslim scholars who may well belong to the first generations of women in their families who have had equal access to education from their earliest years up to postgraduate level. Just as the emergence of women Christian theologians has brought new interpretations of theology and new readings of the scriptures and tradition in Europe in recent decades, so the same thing is happening in Islam; there can be an important role here for facilitation by Christian women theologians in dialogue and support.

The point must also be stressed again that immersing oneself in the study of Islam provokes reflection on the similarities and differences between it and Christianity and thus demands further Christian theological reflection on the part of the student. At the end of this paper, I will lay out two attempts to structure a course and an introductory text on Understanding Islam within these Muslim paradigms.

Reflections – future impulses

A common belief in God

One of the seminal developments of the Second Vatican Council was to make explicit for the first time in an Ecumenical Council that Muslims and Christians worship the one and only God (*Lumen Gentium* §16, *Nostra Aetate* §3). This necessarily changes the dynamic of Christian-Muslim relations and marks a departure from the earlier polemic and charges of the ungodly nature of Islam. This brings with it the humility that must accompany two faith traditions under God – and indeed three, when we include Judaism in the equation. Some Muslim scholars have indicated that, whilst Christians and Jews worshipped God in the pre-Muhammadan era, such worship will no longer be accepted because, if they were authentic in their worship, they would have recognised the final message in the Qur'an and become Muslims. Such a position could not be taken in Christian theology, which is not to deny that a similar idea has been present in the past in relation to the Jews. Given the current theological emphasis on the two covenants, or the one covenant in two parts, between God and the Jews and Christians, our theology must accept the authenticity of Jewish worship in the post-Christian period. This gives us a theological model to apply also to the worship of Muslims. Worship, in Christian understanding, is a two-way process; it is part of a relationship between God and the worshipper. To say in Christian terms, that Muslims worship God surely implies that this is acceptable to God. Therefore Pope John Paul can speak of a "spiritual brotherhood" between Muslims and Christians and we need to be open to the possibility of listening to what God might be saying to Christians in and through the lived faith of Muslims.

One of the things that the Council documents say of Muslims is that they are "esteemed" and in this context their life of prayer, charity, submission to the divine decree etc. are mentioned. The Council was silent on the question of the status of Muhammad and the Qur'an but we must ask how Muslims can be esteemed for their life of faith, without an acceptance that such a life is built on these two foundations. If Christians then are to esteem Muslim believers, this must require that we explore, study and come into a relationship with the Qur'an and Muhammad as part of our spiritual brotherhood. This does not and cannot mean that Christians hold them in the same regard as Muslims but we cannot be disinterested, dismissive or agnostic to their status and indeed need to ask how they can be agents through which God brings those who follow them into such a laudable way of life.

Just as we must say that the God who was worshipped by Abraham and Moses must be the God that Christians have come to understand in trinitarian form, even though

they did not know this and Jews would find this impossible to accept, so, from the perspective of Christian theology, we must hold that Muslims are also worshipping this trinitarian God, even though they would reject this understanding. This led the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales in their handbook for inter-faith relations (*Meeting God in Friend and Stranger*, 2010) to note: "…all genuine prayer is in fact the work of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the one God at work within us. It is the Father, through the risen Christ, who bestows the Spirit when we are moved to pray; and when we pray, it is in fact the Spirit prompting us to pray to the Father through the one Mediator, the risen Lord Jesus Christ" (§136). In so doing, they were commenting on Pope John Paul's remarks (22 December 1986) about the multifaith prayer event at Assisi, in which he held that *every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person*. This must prompt us to revisit our theology of the Word and Spirit of God being at work outside the visible Church. Similarly, we need to revisit our theology of salvation. There is and can only be, in Christian understanding, one Saviour, but is the saving act of God in Christ, through the entire *transitus* of his incarnation, life, death and resurrection, limited only to explicit believers or does it fundamentally change the human condition so that Muslims also, in their covenant with God, are saved through the work of God in Christ?

When thinking of "common beliefs" we always need critically to examine how "common" they are. There is a tendency to use a technical term from the Christian theological vocabulary and apply it directly to Islam. Terms such as revelation, scripture and salvation have distinctly different meanings in both traditions; terms such as prayer and devotion have a range of subtle differences; and the Christian technical understandings of God, Word of God and Holy Spirit are not transferable. The Christian doctrines of the incarnation, the role of the Church and a sacramental principle do not find equivalents in Muslim theology, although aspects of them might be shared. This requires a two-step approach when dealing with apparent "commonalities:" first, we need a theological discourse to see where the similarities and differences lie, and second, we need to develop a mode of speech and vocabulary that conveys our precise meaning and thus reduces the possibility of misunderstanding. There have been happy times in the history of the interrelation of the two religions when a common language and philosophical system existed to reduce these misunderstandings (e.g., Arabic and Aristotle) but we do not live in such a period, however, we are where we are and have to find a way of conducting a discourse that reduces the possibilities of misunderstanding. This requires that we "do theology" in our inter-faith discourse and it brings with it always the positive outcome of sharpening our perception of our own theology in the process.

The sources of religion

The twin foundation sources of Sunni Islam (augmented by the infallible Imams in the Shi'a system) are the Qur'an and the *sunna* of Muhammad. This prompts us to reflect on the sources of our Christian faith. In my experience, working across the range of the Christian communities, this is a critical question as there is a great temptation to

make the Bible into something that it is not, namely a source for Christianity of equivalent status and provenance as the Qur'an. This is often an error into which Muslims fall by searching for verses as though they were sent down (*tanzil*) by God to place alongside verses from the Qur'an. Unfortunately, many Christians have fallen into the same error with distorting consequences. This can be seen as more prevalent in some Protestant traditions, especially in more conservative and indeed literalist circles, but it is not something to which Catholics are immune, especially those who stand at some distance from contemporary biblical studies. When we think of the school of Muslim polemics epitomised by Ahmed Deedat, Jamal Badawi and Gary Miller we can see how destructive and counter-productive this is; there simply is not a way forward in "swapping verses" from Qur'an and Bible as though both stand in the same position within our respective religions. To treat the Bible in a literalist way (*pace* those Christian schools who would speak of every word as being "Spirit breathed") is simply not productive.

Many times Christians have said to me that they bought a copy of the Qur'an and tried to read it but found it extremely difficult to penetrate. The Qur'an is not a book of narratives and it almost never says everything on a particular topic all in one place. When working in English, I always recommend those translations by Muslims that include extensive footnotes that clarify the way that the text is understood (Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Muhammad Asad, Muhammad Ali, Ali Unal, Mir Ahmed Ali, M.H. Shakir and M. Makaram Shirazi); there are in fact, to my knowledge, twenty-eight English translations of the Qur'an extant today. This is more difficult in German, where we have only two translations with footnotes (Muhammad Asad and Ali Unal) plus the translations of Paret, Goldschmidt, Henning, Khoury and Zirker; two of which have accompanying commentaries and some of the others minor footnotes. Both in study and in *lectio divina* (the latter being an important means of meditative reflection on the Qur'an for Christians), one needs the footnotes to come to terms with what the Qur'an is saying.

I recommend three methods for Christians who want initially to access the Qur'anic text with understanding: first, to read Sura Twelve (the Joseph story), which is the rare exception within the Qur'an, here adopting a narrative style; second, to work slowly with the aid of footnotes and commentary through Sura Two, which is often called by Muslim scholars "the Qur'an within the Qur'an" as it touches on all the main themes; and three, to take a thematic approach with the help of, for example, Fazlur Rahman's *Major Themes of the Qur'an*. Muslim approaches to the Bible tend to be based on the assumption that they are dealing with a work of like provenance to the Qur'an (the Qur'anic *Injil*), which has been subject to some degree of distortion (*tahrif*); this is not a productive method of approach. What is required is for Christians to find a way of making clear the process of the generation of the biblical texts as we have them today and to accept the consequences, in Muslim eyes, that we stand on quite a different source to the Qur'an.

The classical tripartite sources of Aquinas: scripture, tradition and reason, need to be augmented, especially when we consider the huge growth in Pentecostal communities,

by a fourth source, namely experience. I find it helpful to explore these four in discussion with Muslims in this way. By scripture, we think of the deposit of human authors, redactors and re-writers working under divine inspiration who have left us a record of the dealings of God with the Hebrew people (OT), and the witness of the early Christian community to the teaching and ministry of Jesus worked out theologically, again under divine inspiration, in a particular time and context (NT). This emphasis on the believing community is helpful in trying to explain the Christian understanding of tradition, which I explain as a continuation of this process carried on within the Christian community, under divine inspiration, through the means of conciliar gatherings of Christian leaders to discuss, refine and resolve, within particular temporal and philosophical contexts, what it is that mainstream Christianity believes. This explains how minority opinions either resolved into the consensus or departed from the mainstream to form minority constellations that were, more or less, regarded as pseudo-Christian. Such a formulation helps Muslims to see how Christian faith and theological expression thereof is an on-going process that takes centuries to reach a consensus and forms part of an open-ended development of doctrine. This helps to clarify why Christians are not fazed by the fact that Jesus, as the Revelation of God, does not make explicit the Greek-formulated doctrine of the Trinity. It also gives a means of discussing the oft-cited Muslim position that the Arians, or Unitarian Christians in general, were the true upholders of the teaching of Jesus and Trinitarian Christians, as Greek-inspired distorters of the message.

Reason can be seen as an essential characteristic of being human, that enables us to interrogate the deposit of scripture, the on-going tradition of the Church, the world around us, and our own human selves. Following the Greek philosophers and the Christian theologians that they inspired, I posit God as "self-thinking thought." The first emanation of God is thus the *logos*, as both word and idea, which is the spiritual archetype of human intelligence. Thus through reason, we can access to a certain degree the ways of God and thus gain access to Truth, although God is not ultimately bound by reason as the arational gift of super-abundant grace testifies. Muslims likewise grapple with this question, as can be exemplified in the understanding of the mercy of God overwhelming the wrath of God on the Day of Judgement (*Hadith Qudsi*) and, on that day, one good deed weighing as much as ten bad ones. Ultimately, God is not irrational but we can only comprehend that fully from the divine perspective, which helps us to discuss the need for a *via negative* in Christian theology when speaking of the ineffable God, which is a tradition that philosophically trained Muslims can readily comprehend.

The fourth source of human experience is common to both Islam and Christianity as it represents the ultimacy of faith as a personal relationship between the believer and God. In the mystical traditions of Sunni Islam, this can be seen in the writings, for example, of Rumi and in the Shi'a mystical tradition, "the Imam within." In the Christian tradition, this is expressed in the Quaker dictum of "that of God within every human being," in Methodism "the testimony of the warmed heart," in Pentecostal circles "the inner promptings of the Spirit," and in general, the primacy of the informed conscience. This gives due weight to the ultimate tribunal of the individual

before God at the judgement. Two consequences of this are: first, that there is room for development of doctrine on the basis of individual inspiration and thus reform and renewal of the community as well as of the individual, and second, the Church must be a listening community always willing and eager to hear the voice of God speaking through human beings, whether they are Christians or not; the failure so to do would amount to the arrogance of telling God how God may act.

Truth claims

An inevitable consequence of working in Christian-Muslim dialogue is what to do about the obvious truth claims that divide the two faiths. I divide these into two categories: disparities of fact and disparities of theological understanding. The most obvious example of a disparity of fact is what happened at the end of the earthly life of Jesus; was he crucified, dead, buried and resurrected to eternal life or was he taken up by God into heaven, there to await the divine command to resume his one and only earthly life, at the end of which he will die and be buried in Madina, where he will await the general resurrection? I can see no way in which these two truth claims can be reconciled. What then to do? As a Christian, I must do two things: first, I must develop a means of expression to make clear to Muslims why this is a central element of faith on which I cannot "give way" without undermining the heart of my faith, and second, I must understand why a Muslim cannot "give way" and admit that the Qur'an was in error on this point; once one error is admitted in the Qur'an it loses its status as the divinely protected revealed word of God and opens the way for an unknown number of errors. Part of my Christian responsibility is to show how the suffering, death and ultimate resurrection of Jesus is in accord with the total biblical picture of God's dealing with humanity (e.g., the "Suffering Servant" themes in Isaiah), which will allow Muslim reflection on the same theme, which is not apparent to most. My duty as a Christian teacher is then fulfilled; I must be true to the planting of Christ and the Christian tradition in my life and allow Muslims the same right. We must then allow each other to differ on this point and follow the Qur'anic injunction that on the Day of Judgement, God will make clear those things on which we disagree. Nothing is to be gained from further argument *ad nauseam*.

The second category of disparity of theological understanding is typified in the articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. This is not a statement of historical fact in the same way but rather a code of speech worked out by Christian theologians in an attempt to articulate Christian faith. A survey of Christian theological history will identify various attempts to articulate this in the classical, medieval and modern periods. Each has been worked out within a particular language, at a particular time and in a particular philosophical system. The Christian faith does not change but rather what changes is the articulation of that faith in ways that give insight into the ultimately ineffable nature of God. Throughout the last fourteen centuries, various attempts have been made to express this faith in dialogue with Muslims, all of which have been seen to be more or less inadequate, so this does not mean that it is either a simple task or one that has come to an end. It remains an open question as to whether

at some future date Christian theologians will find a code of speech to talk about this doctrine in a way that allays Muslim concerns that it breaches the oneness of God (*tawhid*). I do not claim to have accomplished this! My own method of approach is to begin by going back into the mind-set of first century Jewish-Christians steeped in the Hebrew scriptures and see the way in which they struggled in biblical terms to express their developing faith in the relationship between God, Jesus and the power unleashed on the Day of Pentecost. It is crucial, in my understanding, to see what was inconceivable for these Jewish monotheists to say, namely to speak of any plurality in God. This can then be traced into the attempts of the Greeks and so on. Finding appropriate words to articulate this is often the challenge, for example, how to translate *hypostasis*. I find it helpful to take the terminology of two outstanding contemporary theologians: Karl Barth, who spoke of "mode of being," and Karl Rahner, who preferred "mode of subsisting." Both were clear that they stood in the tradition of Nicaea by speaking of the *hypostases* as "eternal, real and essential to the divine nature" rather that the heresy of Modalism (Sabelius, 2nd century), which saw them as "historically conditioned accidents." This approach reinforces the key point of the oneness of the *ousia* (substance).

In a similar way, the centrality of the sacramental principle in both orthodox and catholic traditions of Christianity, as an extension of the understanding of the incarnation as human interface with God, is something that needs to be articulated, as it is something central to both our theology and devotional life. How are we to express the interpenetration of the divine into the created order and the relationship of the present "remembrance," in the full sense of *anamnesis*, with the "event"? This opens the way for a discussion of meta-history, in which an event of great significance is "eternally present" with God that can be accessed through all time through "remembrance." This is an especially fruitful line of discussion with all Muslims when one considers the events of the Hajj, and particularly with the Shi'a, for whom the "remembrance" of the events of Karbala, expressed in the dictum "Every place is Karbala and every day is Ashura" is an especially fruitful line of discussion.

There is real scope, I think, for a suitably equipped Christian theologian with an appropriate knowledge of Islam, to trace the historical development of these and other doctrines through various expressions in the attempt to make them clear(er) and more fruitful as meeting places in our dialogue. This is real *dialogue* (talking through with the goal of coming to a deeper understanding that has yet to be realised). In my opinion, we should not work on the principle of needing to resolve these conflicting truth claims, which lie within the knowledge of God alone, but rather to live with them in a constructive way, as we must do also with Judaism and other traditions, as two faith traditions before the one God, each being faithful to God's planting within us as communities and individuals.

Outline of a course within a Muslim paradigm

Following the principle that in order to enter into dialogue with Muslims about Islam one needs to understand Islam from within a Muslim paradigm, I would like to offer two examples from my own work. The first is an introductory text that aims to set out

such an understanding in my *Short Guide to Understanding Islam* (available to download as a pdf file from my website: www.chrishewer.org with a German translation also available from the same website *Islam verstehen, wie er sich selbst versteht*). This text has proved useful for students and for religious education teachers who need a background understanding of Islam in order to deliver elementary lessons thereon. It has also been taken up by some mosques in England and Ireland, who have printed copies for free distribution to visitors who would understand Islam.

The second resource is far more extensive. In 2013-14, I was asked to present a weekly thirty-minute talk on a Muslim satellite TV channel to help the non-Muslim friends of regular viewers gain an understanding of Islam. This project ran to forty-six episodes in four series and each talk was accompanied by an article covering the same ground in more depth with Qur'anic references. The videos of each talk and a downloadable pdf file can also be found on my website (above) by clicking on the button labelled "UI course." For those who find it easier, all the articles from each series have been compiled into four pdf files, which can also be downloaded from my website, each bearing the name of the series. The outline is reproduced here by way of example:

Series One: The Big Picture
1. Where to start?
2. What is *islam*?
3. What's special about being human?
4. We need guidance!
5. What is a Prophet?
6. What can we say about God?
7. Who was Muhammad?
8. What is the Qur'an?
9. What is the purpose of religion?
10. The Arabian Peninsula in the 7th century
11. What happened after Muhammad: the Sunni View?
12. What happened after Muhammad: the Shi'a View?

Series Two: Standing before God
1. Three forms of prayer
2. Focus on *salat*
3. The mosque in the life of Muslims
4. The discipline of fasting
5. United on pilgrimage
6. The visitation of holy places
7. Modesty: the special character of a Muslim
8. The rituals of birth and death
9. Angels, Jinn and the Final Judgement
10. The Imams as spiritual guides
11. Encountering the Word of God in the Qur'an
12. Sufis and the ascent to God

Series Three: Building a Just Society
1. The family as the basis of society
2. The ethics of life
3. Education to serve God and humanity
4. A just economic system
5. Relieving the sufferings of others
6. Ecology and the environment
7. Politics – community life under God
8. An ethical framework
9. Shari'a – life on the path to paradise
10. Peace, war and *jihad*
11. Martyrdom and sacrifice
12. Inviting others to the path

Series Four: Bearers of the Final Message
1. The initial expansion of Muslim rule
2. Islam spreads outside the Middle East
3. Greek knowledge passes through the Muslim lands
4. Sifting and collecting the Hadith
5. Theologians and their schools
6. Islam and other faiths
7. The Islamic critique of Judaism and Christianity
8. Looking again at Islam and women
9. The Art of Islam
10. Muslims in the contemporary world

It is important to consider what is not attempted in these two resources. The 1991 CEC/CCEE "Islam in Europe" report on *The presence of Muslims in Europe and the theological training of pastoral workers* identified two possible ways of proceeding: an introductory course on Islam and a study programme underlining Islam's impact in every branch of Christian theology. These two resources represent attempts at the first way. In the field of adult popular education, the second can only be attempted in face-to-face courses, in which Christian students are assisted and accompanied in their theological reflection from a Christian perspective. This emphasises the importance of the course being taught by someone trained in Christian theology. It is certainly the case in England that adult church members have a fairly limited comprehension of Christian theological thinking and so the teacher is necessarily teaching Christian theology in order to facilitate this reflection.