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'Get Wisdom, Get Understanding': How Study Contributes to Muslim-Christian Engagement

In this article Ida Glaser draws on diverse biblical materials, particularly the Wisdom tradition, to support a call for the importance of studying Islam and hearing Muslim voices in order to enhance Christian-Muslim engagement. She challenges Christians whose approach to Islam is divorced from both Islamic and biblical wisdom.

> The objective is not, as the Crusaders believed, the repossession of what Christendom has lost, but the restoration to Muslims of the Christ whom they have missed.[1]

Yesterday, I picked up a church magazine that held two articles on Islam. One related the stories of two Christians who had been assisted by Christian Solidarity Worldwide in their struggle with injustice experienced in Islamic societies. The other emphasised the Qur'anic and Islamic nature of terrorism and suicide bombings. Both articles had much to commend them, and raised issues of which Christians need to be aware. But I was disturbed: quite apart from concern about the accuracy and balance of the articles in themselves, they seemed to have no context. There was no reflection on how these views of Islam might relate to other aspects of Islamic life, or, even more seriously, on how Christians should think about Islam or relate to Muslims. In particular, there was much elsewhere in the magazine about the church's mission, both at home and overseas, but nothing of this related to Muslims. What, I wondered, was the objective of publishing these two articles? And what was the effect of their publication?

My unease with current discourse on Islam forms the backdrop to the current article. Sometimes, Islam is presented as the zenith of cultured tolerance: sometimes, as the nadir of savage intolerance. Study is important if we are to understand diversity and reach discerning balance. Study is important if we are to make informed decisions. Study is important if we are to communicate effectively. More importantly, study is important if we are to live Christ-like, biblically faithful lives in relation to Muslims, not least to avoid the basic sin of bearing false witness against our Muslim neighbours. This paper does not attempt to unravel complex issues, but rather to offer biblically based hope for a response

1 K. Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (2nd edn), Collins, 1986, p 220.

to Islam that starts not with a fight against apparent earthly foes but with the girding of the spiritual essential of truth (Eph. 6:14).

Get wisdom!

When Solomon inherited the job of managing a society at the height of its interactions with other nations,[2] he discerned well his greatest need: wisdom (1 Kings 3:5-10, 2 Chron. 1:7-13). Whether on the levels of government, of intellect, of personal relationship or of sharing faith, current Christian engagement with Muslims surely shares this primary need. But what kind of wisdom do we need, and how do we get it?

'Wisdom', in Solomon's time, was more than an ability to think and act well. It was almost a technical term for the education given to kings and those in positions of responsibility. In particular, proverbs were a form of instruction for rulers[3] and biblical Proverbs echoes the link between wisdom and kings (e.g. Prov. 1:1, 25:1, 31:1). Solomon is not the only biblical example of education in foreign wisdom as a basis for interaction with non-Israelites: Moses' education in the Egyptian court doubtless included much 'wisdom', and Daniel and his friends were educated in the wisdom of the Babylonians. However, the inclusion in the Old Testament of wisdom writings attributed to Solomon makes him a particularly useful study.

Solomon got his wisdom in two primary ways. The focus of 1 Kings and Chronicles is on what God gave him: a wise, understanding, discerning *mind*. From these books alone, one might conclude that all Solomon's wisdom was a direct gift of God – from the decision about the prostitute's child (1 Kings 3:16-28) to the 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs (1 Kings 4:32). However, perusal of the literature attributed to Solomon suggests another channel: 'He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs.' (Eccles. 12:9). Comparison of biblical wisdom literature with that of the surrounding nations indicates that this painstaking *work* included study of the wisdom of the Egyptians, Babylonians and Canaanites as well as that of Israel. Could we expect anything less from someone to whom God gave 'a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the sea shore' (1 Kings 4:29)?

And should we expect anything less of ourselves? In this reflection on the place of study in the Muslim-Christian interaction, I want to begin by offering the biblical wisdom literature as an incentive and, to some extent, a model, of how Christians can incorporate study into their search for wisdom in dealing with Muslims in particular. Such study cannot replace God-given discernment; rather, if Solomon is anything to go by, it is a necessary corollary of God's gift.

2 David's reign had developed friendly links with surrounding nations and incorporated many non-Jews into key roles, such as his personal bodyguard. See my *The Bible and Other Faiths: What does the Lord require of us?*, IVP, Leicester 2005, pp 116-22, which also explores some of the ideas about Solomon and wisdom discussed in the present article.

3 For example, the various collections of Egyptian proverbs in J.B. Pritchard's classic *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament,* Princeton University Press, 1955, pp 412-424, are associated with rulers. In the following, Pritchard will be referred to as *ANET*. Reference will also be made to W. Beyerlin's collection, *Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, SCM, London 1975, referred to as *NERT*.

Solomon's study and ours

Perhaps the key to the biblical wisdom literature is that it explores what it means to be human. It expresses joys and sorrows, longings and frustrations, and analyses love and hate, work and play, life and death. In this, it parallels other contemporary literature.

- An Egyptian 'Dispute over suicide' (*ANET* pp 405-7) echoes the exploration of life, death and pleasure in Ecclesiastes.
- The Egyptian 'Instruction of Amen-em-opet' (*ANET* pp 421-4) includes proverbs very similar to those in biblical Proverbs.
- A Sumerian poem (*NERT* pp 140-2) so parallels Job's experience that it is called 'The Sumerian Job', and an Akkadian 'Dialogue on the unrighteousness of the world' (*NERT* pp 133-7) follows Job's format of dialogue between sufferer and friend.
- An Egyptian love song (*ANET* pp 467-9) shares some of the imagery of the Song of Solomon.

What should we make of this? There are all the 'critical' questions about dating and dependency, but there are more important questions. I want here to ask what Solomon (and the other wisdom writers) was doing in relation to the wisdom of people of other faiths, and what we might therefore do.

Studying the primary texts

First, the biblical authors were evidently people of their time, who knew the works of other writers. Solomon, Daniel and Moses studied the wisdom of their time, and probably other biblical authors did the same. I would conclude that, if we are to interact with and express ourselves in relation to the world of Islam, we need to study the Islamic equivalent of wisdom – to become familiar with the primary texts of Qur'an and Hadith, as well as the great range of current thinking and the history of interpretation.

That this is the necessary basis for what follows might seem obvious, but it is worth underlining. In particular, the study of the range of interpretation enables the student to begin to understand Islamic points of view. For example, the Qur'anic material used to justify terrorism can be viewed through the eyes of different kinds of Muslims at different times in history and can be put into the context of other aspects of Islamic traditions. It is then possible to begin to distinguish between the effects of human nature and the effects of the Islamic sources, and to see how the two interact in different situations.

Re-writing wisdom: doing theology in context

The wisdom literature does not merely echo that of the surrounding nations. Even the material most closely parallel with other literatures has its differences from them. In fact, it is sometimes where the parallels are closest that the differences can be most clearly seen. For example, the Akkadian dialogue mentioned above speaks of god and goddess, but is limited to the discussion between the sufferer

and his friend. They address each other and not the god, and there is no narrative context or divine intervention. The 'Sumerian Job' does include some narrative, and finishes with the sufferer's words accepted by the god, and the god restoring his fortunes and dealing with the evil spirit who had caused the suffering. However, there is nothing parallel to the majestic encounter with God of Job 38-41.

What is happening here? It seems that, while the biblical author is exploring something of common interest, and using common literary forms, he is doing so on a different basis. He is both expressing and critiquing a common idea on the basis of his knowledge of Yahweh; and he is indicating how the reality of Yahweh transforms the problem. We might say that he is expressing his theology in conversation with the wisdom of the 'other'. This has vast implications for Christians studying Islam. Here are three:

We are drawn into subjects that interest Muslims. For example, Islam's classification of human actions in terms of permitted (*halal*) and forbidden (*haram*)[4] draws us into reflection on such issues as food and purity – urgent practical issues with gospel implications that were crucial in New Testament times, but which hardly impinge on the twenty-first century western Christian mind.

We find ourselves addressing new issues – or, at least, addressing old issues in new ways. For example, an international theological conference was held in Northern Nigeria in 1999, aptly entitled 'Suffering and Power in Christian-Muslim Relations'.[5] Reflection on the actuality of social and political interaction resulted in identification of an agenda for theological study in the areas of church and state, territoriality, ecclesiology and 'suffering and sharing'.[6] There are, of course, links between these subjects. It is the Islamic understanding of religion as requiring political expression that provokes the study of how Christians view links between faith and power, and the Islamic understanding of land as Islamic territory that makes questions about the place of territory in biblical thinking so crucial. The ecclesiological questions then have to do with what the church looks like when it has to function in Islamic territory and under Islamic rule. The 'suffering' question asks how we deal with pressure and persecution and with that is linked the question of 'sharing' between Christians in different contexts.

The study of Islam thus provokes further study of our own Scriptures – and this was sadly missing from the church magazine discussed above. There was no movement from the presentation of some of the objectionable (from a Christian perspective) aspects of Islamic society to an understanding of them within a biblical framework. Neither was there any reflection on how Christians should respond in the light of the cross.

4 This is the simplest of classifications – Islamic law classifies actions much more precisely within these broad categories. See, for example, A.R. Doi, *Shari'ah: the Islamic Law*, Ta Ha, London 1984, pp 50-51.

5 *Transformation,* vol 17 no 1 (2000), 'Papers from the Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Commmunion Theological resource Network Consultation held in Jos, Nigeria in July 1999'.

6 I. Glaser, 'Theological Questions: an agenda for study', in *Transformation* vol 17 no 1 (2000), pp 44-8. Other areas identified were ethics and theological understandings of Islam.

Communication: the limits of wisdom

Not only were the biblical authors doing their theology in the context of their world's wisdom, they were also communicating within that world. Because they were part of the world, and studying it, they were thinking in similar forms. The corollary is that their writings would have communicated the God of Israel into the world of other gods, because

- **They dealt with common interests**. If Muslims are more interested in food and purity laws than in justification by faith, this may be where we need to begin in our gospel communication. Questions of territory and power are not only important to enable Christians to survive, but also because they are of crucial interest to Muslims.
- **They started from common ground**. Despite its different basis, much of the 'common sense' observation of biblical wisdom agrees with that of the surrounding wisdom literature. It is a basic principle of communication that common ground be used as a basis for understanding before moving to exploring difference.
- **They used common literary forms**. It is not only the context of a message that communicates, the form is also vital. Study of Islamic communications can open ways of interaction.

However, as noted above, biblical wisdom does not simply echo the world's wisdom; it selects from it and puts it into a different framework. Even more significantly, it pushes it to its limits, and shows that something more is needed. While Proverbs and the Song of Solomon give positive views of wisdom, Job and Ecclesiastes cry out for answers that go far beyond what wisdom can supply. It is not excessive to suggest that neither perspective really receives a satisfactory answer until the cross and resurrection. Study of Islam will not only enable us to communicate with Muslims on the basis of our common ground, but to see where the Bible actually answers their deepest questions. They may then be able to see incarnation, cross and resurrection as good news rather than as blasphemy.

Wisdom in the market place: study as a locus of Muslim-Christian interaction

Wisdom, says Proverbs, cries out in the market place (Prov. 1:20, 8:1-3). It is not only that the questions it raises are of public interest, and that the discussion is open to all, the wisdom discourse actually takes place in the public arena. Of course, wisdom has to shout loudly to make herself heard, and the voice of folly is there to compete (Prov. 9:13-15); but the market place is nevertheless the place of meeting and discourse. In the twenty-first century, too, the way is open for Muslims and Christians alike to contribute to any current public debate, and to study together where appropriate.

The study context, as the 'market' context, can offer a 'level playing field' such as is difficult to achieve in most so-called 'dialogue' programmes. This is, I think, because all parties are focussed on something other than themselves: they have a shared object of study. Certainly, my experience of teaching courses on 'History

of Muslim-Christian Dialogue' and 'Reading the Qur'an and the Bible' indicates the value of Muslims, Christians and others sitting equally as students before the material of history and text. Other examples of fruitful interaction through study can be seen in the development of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning,[7] and in conferences where Muslims and Christians study the Qur'an and the Bible together.[8]

Such joint study not only develops relationship through common endeavour, it also leads to understanding of the challenges that both Muslims and Christians share in dealing with historical contexts and interpretations of texts. Any Christian involved in such study would be likely to ensure that their church magazine at least acknowledged the range of honest interpretative struggles within Islam, and would see the tensions as problematic not only for Christians but also for Muslims. This takes us to the value, to Muslims, of Christians studying Islam. While it is true that the validity of non-Muslim study of Islam has been questioned since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism,*[9] some of the Muslims who are calling for re-interpretation welcome sympathetic non-Muslim involvement. For example, Fazlur Rahman's well known call for 'transformation of an intellectual tradition' acknowledges that non-Muslims can share in what he calls the 'purely cognitive effort' of understanding the Qur'an in its historical context.[10]

While some Christians question the value of helping Muslims to deal with their own heritage, others would see such an enterprise as an aspect of Christian mission for two reasons. First, it can enable Christians to live at peace with Muslims and to have more freedom for their own life and mission. It can also lead to Muslims having more freedom to learn about other faiths and to convert if they so choose. Second, it can open readings of the Qur'an and Islamic tradition that lead towards an understanding of God that is closer to that of the Bible than is that of most Muslims, and thus to the sort of contextualised gospel challenge that we have seen in the wisdom literature.

How should we study?

The result of Solomon's wisdom was not only survival for Israel. It was not even only overflowing blessing for Israel. It was also blessing for many non-Israelites, as they flocked to see and hear and learn (1 Kings 4:34; 10:1-13, 24; 2 Chron. 9). This is not surprising, given that the major purpose of Israel has always been the blessing of the nations (Gen. 12:3). I want to suggest that this model should motivate any Christian study of Islam, and, indeed, any other Christian engagement with Muslims. While the primary objective in any Christian venture is the honour of Christ, Christ will be honoured in his objective of bringing blessing to all. In the following tentative reflection on **how** we should study, I shall follow the methodology of listening first to an Islamic perspective and then to the Bible. The

7 See www.etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/

8 Records of two such conferences that I have attended are in M. Ipgrave, (ed), *Scriptures in Dialogue: Christians and Muslims studying the Bible and the Qur'an together*, Church House Publishing, London 2004, and M. Ipgrave, (ed), *Bearing the Word: prophecy in Biblical and Qur'anic perspective*, Church House Publishing, London 2005.

9 E.W. Said, *Orientalism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1978.

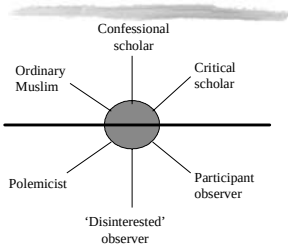
10 Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: transformation of an intellectual tradition*, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p 4.

former aims to offer loving attention to the people who are to be blessed, and the latter to seek the godly wisdom that truly honours Christ.

Listening to a Muslim: studying lovingly?

One of the few Muslim writers to have given serious attention to non-Muslim study of Islam is the South African, Farid Esack. The diagram that follows is taken from the introduction of his *The Qur'an, a short introduction*[11] and shows his illustration of how people study the Qur'an.

Approaches to the Qur'an



F. Esack, *The Qur'an, a short introduction*, p 3.

The portion above the line indicates the range of Muslim readers and the portion below the line the range of non-Muslim readers. Thus far, the terms used are self-explanatory.

However, Esack describes his categories of reader in a second way. He develops the idea of the Qur'an as a beloved human being, and Muslims as lovers. The 'ordinary Muslim' then becomes the 'uncritical lover', who simply loves and appreciates without asking questions. The 'confessional scholar' becomes the 'scholarly lover', who studies the beloved's perfections in order to tell them to the world. The 'critical scholar' becomes the 'critical lover', who asks questions about the beloved's origins, language, dress etc, and who may be angry at the way these have been ignored by other lovers.

For the Christian student of Islam, Esack's treatment of the people 'below the line' is of interest. The 'participant observer' becomes the 'friend of the lover' and the 'disinterested observer' becomes 'the voyeur'. The 'polemicist' is described as 'besotted with another woman, either the Bible or secularism', and therefore 'terrified of the prospect that his Muslim enemy's beloved may be attracting a growing number of devotees'.[12] Where, we might ask, should the Christian scholar stand on this spectrum?

From a western academic perspective, 'disinterested' observation is the objective. Should it matter that a Muslim like Esack might see this as 'voyeurism'? Esack's argument is that a scholar who supposes himself disinterested is in fact

11 Farid Esack, *The Qur'an, a short introduction,* One World, Oxford 2002, p 3.

12 Esack, *The Qur'an,* p 9.

deluded: there is no scholarship that is without suppositions or ulterior motives. With that we can agree. All observers observe from within some framework of understanding. But Esack has a deeper concern than this. The scholars he sees as 'voyeurs' are those who apply critical scholarship to the Qur'an with no apparent concern for those who hold it dear. Such a scholar 'claims that he is merely pursuing cold facts surrounding the body of the beloved, regardless of what she may mean to her lover or anyone else'.[13] He includes here people like Patricia Crone and John Wansbrough, who have challenged the whole framework of traditional understandings of early Islamic history.[14]

While challenging their claim to 'disinterestedness', Esack does not dismiss these scholars. In fact, he quotes them elsewhere in the book, either to acknowledge an alternative theory or to use some of their research (e.g. pp 92, 119, 139). He is more dismissive of the 'polemicists' who use such scholarship without, he suggests, understanding its methodology. These 'polemicists' have, he says, realised that they are not succeeding in convincing Muslims of the beauty of their own beloved (i.e. the Bible), and are now resorting to telling them how ugly is the other beloved (i.e. the Qur'an). Others are blaming the beloved for the behaviour of the lover – e.g. blaming the Qur'an for the violent behaviour of some Muslims – and are therefore trying to discredit the Qur'an as a whole. The work of people like Crone and Wansbrough serves as useful ammunition in such an enterprise. Esack points out that, were these polemicists to apply to the Bible the same critical methodology that Crone and Wansbrough use for the Qur'an, their own 'fundamental mindset would probably collapse'.[15]

Such an analysis poses several important questions to Christian students of Islam (and to compilers of church magazines):

Questions about openness:

- First, are we open about the presuppositions and limitations that determine how we study? This is not only a question about what we say to others, but about what we say to ourselves: are we aware of the places in which we are by no means 'disinterested?'
- Second, are we willing to apply the same criteria to our study of Christianity that we apply to Islam? Do we sometimes compare the worst of Islam with the best of Christianity?

Questions about motivation:

- First, is our motivation FEAR? Esack identifies fear of the power and growth of Islam as a key component of polemic.
- Second, do we take into account the point of view of Muslims? Esack's main sadness about the 'voyeurs' is that they do not seem to notice what the Qur'an means to Muslim people.

13 Esack, *The Qur'an,* p 8.

14 For example, P. Crone and M.Cook, *Hagarism – the making of the Islamic world*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1977 and J. Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: sources and methods of scriptural interpretation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1977.

15 Esack, *The Qur'an,* p 10.

- Third, and perhaps most importantly, what about the dimension of 'friends of the lover'? Esack is most positive about those whose study of the Qur'an grows out of interaction with, and concern for, Muslim people.

It seems to me that these questions are, at base, questions about truth and about love. The first set of questions challenges the student to rigorous truthfulness. The second set concerns relationships: What do we do with our fears? Are we actually interested in what Muslims themselves think and feel? Most importantly, do we have their welfare in mind, or only our own? The three questions are inextricably linked: fear is an opposite motivation to love. It can both trap people into their own perceptions, and produce hostility against rather than concern for the perceived threat.

Listening to the Bible: following Jesus?

In Solomon, I have offered a biblical precedent for study. In the Wisdom literature, I have offered a biblical model for study. In responding to Esack, I have come to questions of truth and love, which are key biblical concerns. They are concerns which reflect the biblical notion that Israel existed for the sake of the other nations, and that Christians are called to follow their Lord in loving all peoples. Solomon's example of prayer for Yahweh to listen to non-Jews, with its corollary of non-Jews being welcomed into the temple, is a good illustration of this (1 Kings 39: 41-43, 2 Chron. 6:32-33).

However, there are other dimensions here. Solomon's interactions with people of other faiths are not entirely exemplary. While his wisdom attracted many non-Jews and even brought some to faith in the God of Israel, he himself was led into disastrous idolatry through his alliances with non-Jewish women (1 Kings 11v1-13). Turning to Proverbs, we find that he did not keep his own advice. Proverbs is clear that folly as well as wisdom cries out in public; and folly is pictured as the adulterous woman. It is, perhaps, no coincidence that Israel's idolatry is frequently presented as adultery. This suggests that faithful study is *discerning*. Friends of Muslims we may be, but that does not mean that our study of Islam and of Muslim history and society has to be uncritical. Proverbs insists:

> Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent – the Lord hates them both. (Prov. 17:15).

The current zenith/nadir dichotomy in the reporting of Islam illustrates the wisdom of this proverb. The Lord, it seems, is pleased neither with a focus on cultured tolerance that ignores the various ways in which Muslims are and have been intolerant nor with a focus on the violent potential of Islamic texts that devalues their potential for peace. Faithful study considers all sides of an issue. Here is another relevant proverb:

> The one who states his case first seems right, until another comes and examines him. (Prov. 18:17).

What else might Proverbs have to teach about study? It has a great deal to say about seeking and paying attention to wisdom and teaching, but this leaves open the question as to whether aspects of Islam might function as such. For example, few Christians would want to see the Qur'an as a whole as a source of wisdom to

be classified with the wise instruction of Proverbs 4. More relevant to the question of the study of Islam are some of the attitudes recommended. At the foundation of any wisdom is fear of the Lord (1:7); and the basis of any effective plan is that it is committed to Him (16:4). Humility and integrity are essential foundations for wisdom and guidance (11:2-3) and knowledge is not achieved without discipline and reproof (12:1). The study of Islam and disciplines germane to the Christian-Muslim interface is as demanding as any other call to Christian discipleship.

I would want to go further, to say that study is an essential aspect of discipleship in this context. Here are two more proverbs:

> Knowledge is required for prudent action (Prov. 13:16).
>
> He who answers before listening – that is his folly and shame (Prov. 18:13).

'Don't disempower people,' I sometimes get warned when asked to speak to Christian groups. 'We don't want people to think that they have to do PhDs in order to relate to Muslims.' And of course that's right: all you need to relate to a Muslim is humanity.

But the knowledge required for prudent action has to have a source and listening is essential to wise response. Study can help individuals in their interactions at all levels. Pastors, teachers and other professionals need a basis for helping people to relate. The people who are to train them need to learn and at least some Christians need to study in depth. Study has its place in different ways for different members of the body of Christ and some members need to be dedicated to study in order to serve the rest of the body.

The two areas of concern raised in the church magazine indicate that such study has requirements and implications way beyond the boundaries of church or seminary. What knowledge is required for prudent action in cases where Christians suffer hardship at the hands of Muslims? To what should Christians listen in order to respond to Islamic aspects of current violence? The academic disciplines of history, politics, anthropology, literature, languages, media studies and psychology are just as relevant as those of theology and religious studies. Who are the actors needing prudence? And who are the key respondents? Any relevant wisdom that Christians acquire will be needed in the 'market place', where it can be put to the service of secular people and of people of all religions, including Islam, for these issues affect us all.

I would like to finish by saying that, whatever else we study in the service of Muslim-Christian interactions, we all – whatever part of the body we may represent – need to study the Bible. This is not just a pious plea to keep up with the quiet times and the preaching in order to live a Christ-like life amongst Muslims. It is a statement of an urgent need deliberately to read the Bible in the context of Islam. I have written elsewhere about what this might involve[16] and about doing theology in 'cross-reference' to other faiths.[17] The latter phrase includes the notion that such

16 I. Glaser, 'Reading the Bible in the context of Islam', in *UBS Journal*, Pune: Union Biblical Seminary, vol 3 no 1 (2005), pp 82-101. My recent *The Bible and Other Faiths,* IVP, Leicester 2005 is an attempt to read the Bible more widely in the context of non-Christian faiths.

17 I. Glaser, 'Cross-reference theology', in P. Gardner, C. Wright and C. Green (eds), *Fanning the Flame: Bible, Cross and Mission*, Zondervan, 2003, pp 241-260.

theology ultimately centres on the cross, which is not only at the heart of biblical faith but also at the heart of its differences with all other systems. Biblical study in Islamic contexts can take us into all the areas mentioned above, and more, but it is the study of the cross in relation to Islam and to Muslims that is, perhaps, the one essential element.

We have just one account of Jesus, who is 'our wisdom' (1 Cor. 1:30), preparing for ministry in His youth. He was 'sitting among the teachers, listening to them, and asking questions.' (Luke 2:46) That is, he had joined a class at the temple. He was studying at the highest seat of learning of the people amongst whom he was incarnate. Jesus' approach to learning sets the scene for his future engagement with the Jewish people, for his brilliant parables for 'common' people, as well as for his brilliant discussions with religious scholars and political tyrants. He was 'sitting among the teachers'. Does following Him imply that Christians should learn Islam from and among Muslims? He was 'listening to them'. Does this imply taking time to understand Islamic ways of thinking? He was 'asking questions'. Does this imply study as the locus for challenge as well as for learning?

And whence might we expect such a pattern to lead? To a society free from terrorism? To freedom for Christians under Islamic rule? To a victory of Christianity over Islam? Perhaps not. For this beginning for Jesus led him not to conquest but to the cross, and only after that to the resurrection. Working for peace, for freedom and for justice is important but, if our major objective is keeping our society Christian and making life easier for ourselves, then Jesus' example is not the one we should follow. What would happen, one wonders, were a concerted search for true wisdom, by God-given discerning hearts, to restore the Christ whom they have missed to the ailing remnants of Christendom?

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