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BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: CHRISTIAN - MUSLIM CONVERSATIONS AND A JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY IN DUNDEE

John Drummond Clark

URBAN TRACTS



William Temple
Foundation

Between Two Worlds: Christian - Muslim Conversations and a Journey of Discovery in Dundee

by John Drummond Clark

Urban Tracts, Book 8

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Author

John Drummond Clark is a retired NHS Consultant Orthodontist who has made his home in Dundee for the past forty-four years. Scottish Country dancing and exploring the beauty of Scotland has been squeezed into a busy family, professional, and church life. Befriending Muslims has led to an interest in the origins of Islam and the history of Late Antiquity. He has enjoyed his professional career, but if he had his time over again, he would like to be a historian.

See also the UK Urban Mission Portal website <https://www.urbanmissionuk.net/>

Editors' Introduction

Urban Tracts is a series of papers on urban mission and ministry commissioned in the lead up to the 40th anniversary of the Faith in the City report.

The Brixton disturbances of April 1981 prompted, among other things, Archbishop Robert Runcie to set up the Archbishop's Commission on Urban Priority Areas. This led to the publication of the Faith in the City report in December 1985 with its recommendations for church and nation, which proved a great stimulus for urban ministry across the whole UK church. In 2023 the issues of social inequality, racial justice, and the failure of the Church to flourish and grow in urban settings have not gone away—although the enthusiasm for urban ministry of the late 1980s seems to have waned.

To mark the anniversary, the William Temple Foundation is commissioning and publishing (electronically) a new Temple Tract series on urban mission and ministry. Our aim is to produce three or four tracts each year in the lead up to the 40-year anniversary of Faith in The City in December 2025.

These tracts are aimed at practitioners and church leaders, offering reflection and experience from authors who have been involved in urban mission and ministry. We aim to highlight resources and lessons that are relevant for Christians in urban areas today and renew the challenge to the churches.

In seeking an appropriate style for the urban church there will be plenty of photos and links to writings, websites, and videos to explore if you wish to delve deeper or check out sources.

In this Tract John Drummond Clark tackles a common issue for urban Christians and churches; how to engage with, build relationships and dialogue with Muslims who live in their city. Drawing on many years of experience he advocates a Friendship First approach, which allows members of both faith communities to talk honestly about differences of belief and culture, while working together for justice and the shalom of their city.

Greg Smith, Series Editor

Chris Baker, Associate Editor

Ryan Haecker, Production Editor

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Photo Greg Smith

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1. Introduction

I came to live and work in Dundee in 1978 as an NHS Consultant and Honorary Senior Lecturer in Orthodontics. My base was the University Dental Hospital and School, and I also worked in the Royal Infirmary in nearby Perth. Gill and I, and later our family, joined the Steeple church, a congregation of the Church of Scotland, whose vision is to be a *church at the heart of the city with the city at its heart*.

On 11th September 2001, I was not at work, but recovering from a major operation, and my wife, Gill, and I were at a home of friends for lunch. The phone rang, and their daughter, on the other end, told them to go quickly and turn on the TV. Together, we watched in horror as the hijacked American Airlines Flight 11 crashed into the northern façade of the North Tower and the United Airlines Flight 175 crashed into the South Tower. The footage played and replayed, as was the collapse of both towers later in the day. Yet another tragic event in the troubled history of Christianity and Islam unfolded before our eyes, initiating events that were to spread, in different ways, to many countries, including our own. Islam and Muslims became equated with the actions of a handful of violent terrorists. Islamophobia grew with anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic attitudes and sentiments becoming increasingly routine and taken for granted.

For the first time, I realised I knew virtually nothing about Islam and had no Muslim friends. My knowledge was gleaned from the secular and Christian media, which I very early on discovered sometimes portrayed a stereotypical homogeneous and even demonising view of Islam and Muslims.

Some years later, a question crossed my mind. Do the devout Muslim and Christian dental students I observed at the teaching clinic have friendships outside the Dental School and learn about each other's faith? So, there was only one way for me to answer this question. It began with a conversation with my wife, Gill, that went something like this:

I want to invite to our home a few devout Muslims from the Middle-East and a few devout Christian students who study together, to learn more about what Muslims believe and to encourage conversations around the Muslim and Christian faiths.

Do you mean for tea and cake?

I was thinking about a meal.

What! You're joking! You know I'm not a confident caterer, and anyway, I've no idea what to make; I know Muslims don't eat pork, and that other food has to be halal, but I'm not exactly sure what this means, and I don't think you do either! I would hate it if they came and didn't like or didn't want to eat what I made. It would be awful!

So together, we investigated halal Middle Eastern food preferences and settled on the safety of a vegetarian buffet meal. Neither of us can remember what was on the menu except for one item – tabbouleh – a vegetarian salad made chiefly of finely chopped parsley with tomatoes, mint, onion, soaked bulgur wheat and seasoned with olive oil, lemon juice, salt and sweet pepper. The tabbouleh is indelibly ingrained in our minds for one reason only; everyone's appreciation and, in particular, the enthusiastic comment by a female guest from Qatar,

Thank you, that was so good; it was just how my mother makes it and reminds me of home.

This guest made Gill's day and mine too. The evening was a success - for our guests and ourselves - not just because of the food but because it was something more challenging than can be expressed in words. But, at least based on one act of hospitality, we discovered that Christians and Muslims can come together to enjoy one another's company. Moreover, to have conversations about faith with honesty and integrity—discussions which, in our secular and post-modern times, are best thought to be avoided.

When our guests left, we agreed that, like Abraham and Sarah, we received more from them than we gave as their hosts. In one of the many scriptural accounts of hospitality¹ Abraham and Sarah welcome, refresh and feed three unknown guests under the Oaks of Mamre. Disregarding the heat of the day, Abraham and Sarah move toward their guests. They do not wait for the three to come to them; they initiate the encounter, eventually feeding these strangers with bread, a precious calf, milk, and curds. But the story's surprise is found in the fact that these strangers come to give their host a gift. They do not come merely to receive.

¹ Genesis 18:1-9

They come bearing a gift - the promise of a child, Isaac, to whom later God confirmed his commitment to Abraham²,

“I will be with you [Isaac] and will bless you.....I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and give them all these lands, and through your offspring, I will bless all nations on earth.”

So, unknown to our guests, they left the promise of a seed which has grown into a fifteen-year pilgrimage with Muslims, learning about their Prophet Mohammad, the receiver of the Holy Qur'an, the Living Qur'an whose life exemplifies and expands its teaching. For Gill and me, this experience has been and still is, enriching, faith confirming and faith-renewing.



Photo John Drummond Clark

² Genesis 26:1-6

September 2001 was not only the start of a journey getting to know Muslims, their faith, their Holy Qur'an and Hadith, but also the beginning of a journey re-visiting the long-travelled environments which had shaped my Christian faith.³ It was the beginning of re-discovering who Jesus is, what he did, and why that matters. It was re-discovering the message (Gospel or good news) of Jesus and how I could be true to myself and realistically share this good news with others, including Muslim friends.

In Christianity and Islam and the fifteen centuries of shared history, there have always been times of coexistence and times of discord.⁴ In her paper, [*Muslim-Christian Relations: Historical and Contemporary Realities*](#), Jane Smith provides a good overview of nearly fifteen centuries of Christian-Muslim encounter. She points out that Christians and Muslims have mostly lived peaceably together except when there has been Muslim expansion/imperialism into Christian territories and Christian expansion/imperialism in a Muslim land. Repercussions from the Crusades and today's geopolitics continue to resound in the contemporary rhetoric employed by defenders of both faiths. Whoever we are, we have, in our time, an opportunity and responsibility to rise above these challenges and work together for the well-being of our communities and beyond.

This Urban Tract recalls a few experiences from my pilgrimage whose focus has been, and still is, hospitality, friendship, collaboration when possible, and good quality disagreement when necessary, essential foundations for community cohesion and well-being.

My pilgrimage has taken me from a place of ignorance to an encounter primarily with the local Muslim community in Dundee but also, based on my experience in Dundee, further afield through family connections in Preston and Inverness. As a result, I have been privileged to interact with a few of these Muslim communities in all their diversity and to engage in conversations about faith in a variety of settings and contexts.

³ I was baptised as a baby in St Andrew's church Darjeeling and confirmed in April 1964 in St James' Episcopal church in Leith (Edinburgh), where Colin Chapman began his curacy later in the same year. I "gave my life to Jesus" at a boys' camp a few years before my confirmation.

Colin Chapman is a British Anglican clergyman, theologian, and author specialising in Islamic studies and Christian-Muslim relations. He spent much of his career living and working in the Middle East, where he gained a deep understanding of Islam and its role in the region's history and culture. His work focused on building bridges of understanding and dialogue between Christians and Muslims, and he wrote extensively on the subject.

⁴ Goddard, H., 2000. *A history of Christian-Muslim relations*. New Amsterdam Books.

Not surprisingly, there have been challenges and difficulties, some of my own making, along the way. However, in the midst of disappointment, these have been made up for by many times of hope and encouragement. By sharing a little of my experiences, I hope you will be encouraged to step out on your own pilgrimage towards encounter and engagement with your local Muslim community. For those already on the way, I hope my encounters will encourage you to continue on your journey and expand your horizon.

2. Muslim Demographics

In the United Kingdom

Over the last 20 years, the Muslim community in the United Kingdom has grown to over four million people. The 2021 Census results released so far (as of November 2022) show a population of 3.8 million (6.5%) in England and Wales. The up-to-date Scottish census will be published next year, but the 2011 census reported 76,737 Muslims in Scotland (1.45%) [and is predicted to grow to 3%.](#)

Philip Lewis highlights the complex, multi-layered diversity of the Muslim community in the UK. In his paper [*Between Diaspora and Mainstream: Making Sense of Muslim Communities in Britain*](#), he writes,

Understanding the diverse ethno-Muslim communities which have made Britain their home over sixty years requires insights drawn from various academic disciplines, especially migration studies, the sociology of religion and history. These studies illuminate the specificities of competing understandings of Islam that migrant communities brought with them from their countries of origin. It is also clear that second and third-generation British Muslims have to negotiate relations between three distinct religious and social worlds: traditional Islam imported from their relatives' homeland; expressions of Islam drawn from across the Muslim world – the umma – now accessible at a click of a mouse; and Britain itself, where, among a new generation of graduates and professionals, some are seeking new and more expansive readings of Islam to connect with their lived experience, while others, albeit a small minority, are also tapping into 'shaykh google' and the social media to embrace violent, jihadist readings of their tradition. There is a wealth of diversity within British Islam.

However, British Muslims are often viewed as a homogeneous monolithic community. The belief that multiculturalism threatens the British people is widespread in the United Kingdom. Cultural separatism and the self-imposed segregation of British Muslims are believed to enhance divisions between them and the rest of the community. This view gained visibility

after the London Bombings of 7th July 2005 (known as 7/7) and the Muslim protests against the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. The atmosphere of fear surrounding these events forced Britons to regard British Muslims as a threat to national security. As a result, figures such as Nigel Farage emerged to speak out against the presence of Muslims in Britain.

Similarly, Douglas Murray, in his book [*The Strange Death of Europe*](#), argues that Europe suffers from symptoms and maladies embodied by the presence of Islam and Muslims in the home of the European people, from which Europe can't recover. Murray goes so far as to label Islam a terrorist religion, saying,

the claim that Islam is a religion of peace is a nicety invented by Western politicians so as not to offend their Muslim populations or simply lie to themselves that everything might yet turn out fine. But, since its beginning, Islam has been pretty violent.

In contrast, according to the [*Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute's Review of survey research on Muslims in Britain*](#), Muslims have a strong sense of belonging to Britain, feel part of British society, and believe in British values. For example, in a 2016 survey, 93% said they felt they belonged to Britain, with more than half saying they felt this *very strongly*; in another study in 2015, 95% said they felt loyal to Britain.⁵ Most Muslims in Britain consider themselves to be *British* rather than *English, Scottish, Welsh, or Northern Irish*, and most feel that this is their only national identity. However, a substantial minority identify with some foreign nationality. Moreover, those educated abroad are much less likely to think of themselves as British than those educated in Britain.

In Dundee

I came to live and work in Dundee in 1978, but it was much later, after the events of 9/11, that I became interested in Islam and later still, as described in the introduction, that I began to get to know Muslims, and learnt how they came to Scotland and live in Dundee.

⁵ ICM Survey of Muslims for Channel 4: interviews with 1,081 Muslims aged 18+, conducted face-to-face across Great Britain on 25 April-31 May 2015, and with a nationally-representative control group of 1,008 adults aged 18+ by telephone on 5-7 June 2015.

Dundee is not the same place I came to live and work in 1978. Between the 2001 and 2011 censuses, the Muslim population of Scotland increased by nearly 80%. In 2011 it was approximately 1.4% of the population and was predicted to grow to about 3% of the population in the next ten years. Almost 70 percent of Muslims in Scotland live in four cities: Glasgow (42 per cent), Edinburgh (16 per cent), Aberdeen (6 percent) and Dundee (5 percent).



Photo John Drummond Clark

In the 2011 Census of all 147,268 people in Dundee in 2011, 40.8% had no religion, and 6.5% did not state their religion. Of the remainder, 25.3% were Church of Scotland, 18.3% Roman Catholic, 5.1% Other Christian, 2.6% Muslim and Other religions, 1.2%. (2021 Census figures for Scotland have not yet been published).

As I met Muslims in Dundee, I became interested in their story.

Please tell me about yourself and your family; I would love to get to know you better.

Always an excellent way to start a conversation!

Scotland's Muslims

Today, Scotland hosts seventy-six locations for prayer consisting of mosques (six in Dundee, including an Ahmadiyya mosque), temporary spaces for worship, and prayer rooms managed by university Islamic societies or Muslim community centres. These visible symbols of Islam within the Scottish geography, along with minority ethnic grocery stores, restaurants, and takeaway shops, have made a [Muslim presence in the country an everyday reality today](#).

Scotland has been home to established Muslim communities since the early 20th century. However, the first Muslim migrants to Dundee were seamen (*Lascars*) and servants from the Indian subcontinent, some of whom developed lascar communities in Glasgow, Leith and Dundee to provide temporary accommodation for visiting and unemployed sailors and servants prior to their return to India. A few married local Scottish women and settled in Scotland, as illustrated by [the inclusion of Muslim names in seventeenth-century censuses](#).

Although the records of a Muslim presence in Scotland date back to as early as 1504, the settlers who arrived from South Asia, Pakistan, and India in the aftermath of the second world war formed the first substantial Muslim communities. As with post-war immigration to other parts of Britain and Europe, these settlers were concentrated around urban areas, particularly Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee. But in contrast to many South Asians who arrived in the northern towns of England from the villages and towns of rural Mirpur, the [Scottish immigrants tended to hail from comparatively more affluent Pakistani cities such as Lahore](#).

The research published in [Muslims in Scotland; The Making of Community in a Post-9/11 World](#) suggests;

that lower settlement numbers, fewer worries about terrorism and the welcoming disposition and sociability of Scots have made Muslim integration into society easier than in England. As a result, the story of Muslims in Scotland is one of how an indigenous society can live in harmony with immigrant communities.

Interestingly, it has been suggested that this happy state of affairs was attributed to Anglophobia which both;

displaces Islamophobia by providing another target and [. . .] helps to reduce within-Scotland phobias by providing Scots with [a common, external, and very significant 'Other'](#).

In Dundee, I encountered and engaged with Sunni and Shia Muslims.⁶ The Sunni majority represent some [85% of all Muslims while the latter approximately 15 %](#) I also encountered the Ahmadiyya who consider themselves as Muslims but are not recognised as such by Sunni and Shias. There are an estimated 10-20 million Ahmadiyya worldwide and they are mercilessly persecuted, especially in Pakistan.

In his book [Misquoting Muhammad Jonathan A C Brown](#), one of America's finest Islamic scholars, himself a convert/revert to Islam, gives an excellent summary of Islam's scriptural foundation which is made up of two parts;

The core is the Quran, which Muslims believe to be the unchanging record of God's revealed words, a small volume that can be gripped and memorized word for word. Around it are the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, amorphous and contested. A saying of the Prophet or a description of his actions is known as a Hadith...What one camp considers an authentic and compelling teaching of the Prophet, another considers a forgery. (p.8)

Whilst all branches of Islam are founded on the Prophet Muhammad, to whom God gave the Qur'an, the five core beliefs and practices of Islam,⁷ and the Hadith⁸ incorporating the Sunna,⁹ they are not identical in every aspect of their faith.

It was not long before I learned that all Muslims are **not the same!**

⁶ Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims (also known as Shiites) comprise the two main sects within Islam. Sunni and Shia identities first formed around a dispute over leadership succession soon after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 A.D. Over time, however, the political divide between the two groups broadened to include theological distinctions and differences in religious practices as well.

⁷ The profession of Faith (shahada). The belief that "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God"; Prayer (salat); Alms (zakat); Fasting (sawm); Pilgrimage (hajj).

⁸ The Hadith compiles all the words and actions of the Prophet his way of doing things and his habits.

⁹ "Only a fraction of [the Quran's] verses provide details about Islamic law and dogma. The five daily prayers and the details of the Ramadan fast are found nowhere in the holy book. They were provided by Muhammad's teachings and his authoritative precedent, which explained and elaborated on the Quran. Known as the Sunna, or 'The Tradition,' Muhammad's collective words, deeds, rulings and comportment were understood to be the Qur'an's message implemented in one time and place by the living example of the infallible 'Messenger of God.'" (*Misquoting Muhammad : the challenge and choices of interpreting the Prophet's legacy* p.18).

It is, therefore, important to get to know local Muslims and their communities to avoid applying neat religious categories and portraying them in a way they themselves would not recognise.

Many years later, in 2017, Scotland began to receive refugees who arrived in the UK under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS).¹⁰ They were resettled in towns in the local authority regions in Scotland, including Dundee, where fifty-seven Syrian Muslim families now live.



Photo John Drummond Clark

Along with Muslim immigration has come islamophobia. There have been many attempts to define Islamophobia, most recently by an [All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims](#) who defined it as,

a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-resettlement-schemes-factsheet-march-2021/vulnerable-persons-and-vulnerable-childrens-resettlement-schemes-factsheet-march-2021>

There are problems with this and other similar definitions which focus on Islam as a system or on racism, rather than on individuals because critiquing Islam risks being called Islamophobic.

The influential report of The Runnymede Trust Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, 1997, [“Islamophobia, a challenge for us all”](#), first popularised the term. It made it clear that in a democracy, ‘debates and disagreements with Islam do not diminish efforts to combat discrimination and exclusion’ (p.5). Both are necessary. The report also helpfully contrasted [“closed” with “open” views of Islam](#).

In her recent book, [Islamophobia: What Christians Should Know \(and Do\) About Anti-Muslim Discrimination](#), Jordan Denari Duffner brings the focus back to people by defining Islamophobia as *the prejudice and discrimination that targets people based on their perceived association with Islam and Muslims*. The dominant discourse in Scotland is that it is a tolerant, welcoming and open place for Muslims and others. However, the [Scottish Parliament's Cross Party Group \(CPG\) on Tackling Islamophobia](#) found the opposite to be the case, at least to some extent, as I have when asking Muslim friends. The CPG found 75 per cent of Muslims say that Islamophobia is a common or everyday issue in Scottish society, and 83 per cent of Muslim respondents have experienced Islamophobia directly in a variety of contexts, including in frequency, the street, shops, restaurants, public transport, work and places of education. Islamophobia disproportionately impacts women and is also experienced by others who are mistaken for being Muslim. The inquiry found a diverse set of factors that enable and promote Islamophobia in Scotland, including Brexit, far-right politics, military intervention, problematic counter-terrorism policies and terrorist incidents. However, for all of these, evidence often pointed to the mainstream and social media as the key route through which Islamophobia was enabled. The inquiry found that many barriers were created due to the prevalence of Islamophobia in Scottish society. For example, educational outcomes, job opportunities or promotion at work, and access to healthcare, fitness activities and social housing.

A more extensive UK study into the extent and nature of Islamophobia was undertaken in 2019 by Stephen Jones and Amy Unsworth. The results were published in [The Dinner Table Prejudice Islamophobia in Contemporary Britain](#). Amongst several disturbing findings was that Muslims are the UK's second least-liked group, after Gypsy and Irish Travellers.

3. A Shared World but Different Worldviews

Worldviews are, most often, acquired from the family and community environment in which a child is born. They are the story we learn about how the world works and about what things matter and why. Everyone is shaped by a worldview, which may change over time but is underpinned by central questions. For example, a religious worldview would be shaped by questions such as, Who are we? Where are we? What is wrong? What is the solution? Different questions would underpin a non-religious worldview.

For example: What is good? Where do good and bad come from? Who deserves the good? How can you do good or be good? If Christians and Muslims, or indeed anyone, engage at a deeper level, they must have some understanding of the other's worldview, not just by reading but also through face-to-face conversation and active listening.



Photo John Drummond Clark

So, how can Christians and Muslims navigate [the post-truth worlds](#) in which we live when we both have exclusive claims to the truth? [Miroslav Volf](#) has some wise advice.

If I claim to possess the truth, I will be unlikely even to entertain the possibility that others may be right, or at least partly right, and I wrong, or at least partly wrong; unlikely to enter imaginatively into the world of others to learn to appreciate the force of their account of what happened. In a phrase, I will be unlikely to exercise double vision,¹¹ which is essential to remembering truthfully in conflict situations. Of course, claims to possess the incontestable truth isn't always wrong, but they are always dangerous, especially when a person's claim to possess the truth matters more to her than the truth itself. But this takes us straight back to the moral obligation to remember truthfully. The obligation to remember truthfully and seek the truth counters the dangers involved in claims to possess the truth. Seekers of truth, as distinct from alleged possessors of truth, will employ double vision. They will give others the benefit of the doubt, inhabit the world of others imaginatively, and endeavour to view events in question from the perspective of others, not just their own.

Christian and Muslim worldviews are primarily based on the answers to the four worldview questions derived from their interpretation of their sacred texts, the Bible and the Qur'an. However, neither religion is monolithic; therefore, it's not surprising that there is not a uniform answer to worldview questions in Islam or Christianity (see [Daniels, G. and Farah, W. \(2018\). *Margins of Islam*: William Carey Publishing](#)). With this in mind, it is essential for a Christian to explore a Muslim friend's worldview in conversation and not through books or social media and vice versa.

¹¹ Miroslav Volf, the Croatian theologian, describes double vision in his book *Exclusion and Embrace* as a recursive method that begins with recognising your own beliefs and then stepping outside them into the opinions of others to then reflect on your thoughts from their point of view. You then return to your own, now modified, belief system and repeat the process. Volf argues that if both parties in a disagreement were to adopt this method, they might not reach an agreement. Still, they will exhibit a genuine love for each other in the process, limiting any disposition to either violent conflict or passionless disengagement. Double vision requires understanding how others came to their beliefs and considering how well your beliefs stack up against your interlocutor's.

So, in one of our early meetings, I was graciously welcomed by Zuber, my Imam friend, to discuss our worldviews. The following is a summary that Zuber read out. Like all summaries, they are to be unpacked in further conversations.

Zuber explained that the Qur'an (see footnote 15), the Hadith¹² and the Sunnah¹³ shape the Muslim worldview. The Qur'an is the primary religious text in Islam revealed by God to Prophet Muhammad through the angel Jibril (Gabriel) over several years¹⁴ and proof of Muhammad's prophethood and his most significant miracle. The Qur'an, the Sunnah and the Hadith are the divine revelations (*wahy*) which God delivered through Muhammad.¹⁵ They constitute the primary sources of Islamic teachings and the basis for Islamic law, Sharia. Muhammad's companions documented the Sunnah, the Prophet's tradition and practice, in the Hadith. Reading about Muhammad, the best exemplar of the human race, in the Sunnah and Hadith and following his example will guide believers to virtue and righteousness. Hadith usually have two sections: the *isnad* (the chain of narrators transmitting the report) and the *matn* (the main text of the information).

In response I explained that the Bible, comprising the Old Testament and the New Testament, is foundational to the Christian faith in a similar way that the Qur'an is foundational to Islam. But the Bible and the Qur'an are not comparable texts.

Therefore, using them as proof texts in Christian-Muslim conversations about doctrine is a blind alley that leads nowhere. A generous spirit and double vision are required if the answers the Bible and Qur'an give to the worldview questions are to be discussed.

¹² The Hadith refers to the collection of narrations about the sayings, actions, and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, which Islamic scholars compiled. The Hadith provides Muslims with a detailed account of the Prophet's life and his example, which guides faith, worship, and conduct.

¹³ the Sunnah refers to the actions, teachings, and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad that were recorded in the Hadith, as well as his example and conduct in general. The Sunnah is a model for how Muslims should live per Islamic principles. It includes the Prophet's teachings on various topics, including beliefs, rituals, ethics, and social customs.

¹⁴ Muslims believe that the Quran was verbally revealed from God to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel gradually over a period of approximately 23 years, beginning on 22 December 609 CE, when Muhammad was 40, and concluding in 632 CE, the year of his death.

¹⁵ Islamic scholars have described three ways in which God's revelation can reach his chosen individuals, especially prophets. An inspired message – not a word but an idea – can enter the heart of the chosen individuals either in the state of consciousness or in a dream. The second mode, it is said, is the word heard by the person spoken to, like, from behind a veil (indirectly). An example would be Moses and the burning bush. In the third mode, the revelation is sent from God through archangels like Gabriel and is delivered to the prophets. It is the highest form of revelation, and Muslims believe the whole Quran was revealed in this mode. From <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wahy>

I went on to say to Zuber that Christians recognise the Bible as a collection of ancient writings set in historical contexts, like a library of books and letters written by more than forty people over 1,000 years. There are several different types of writings, including, in the Old Testament, historical books, law, poetry, wisdom and prophetic books and the New Testament, four Gospels (very approximately comparable to Hadith), one history book, twenty-one letters and one prophetic book. Although the Bible is a library of books, a storyline runs through it. It is how the One God created us in his image to be stewards (*Khalifa*) of the perfect world he made in the vast cosmos. Sadly, our idolatry has led us away from the straight path, distancing us from our Maker. Not surprisingly, we find ourselves more and more enslaved to sin and its outworking – the thoughts, words and actions which wreak havoc on our relationships and wreck the good world God created. God cares deeply about our idolatry because it destroys the close relationship he has created for us to have with him. In his generous love and mercy, God, as the Messiah Jesus, takes it upon himself to break the power of our idolatry and the sin which follows. He calls me, and everyone, into his new family and invites us to work with him to bring his new life into our relationships and the contexts in which we find ourselves.

The Bible is not authoritative in the sense of a rule book. Instead, the authority of God is exercised through the Bible. The Bible is the story of God and you and me, the story of us. It is there to be a means of God's action in and through me and us to shape my worldview through study and prayer as an individual and in a community. The Bible [is authoritative only when I allow it to shape my life and the life of my community \(church\)](#) in the context of prayer and worship.

We agreed that Christianity and Islam are logocentric, that is they focus on the Word. However, the significant difference is that the Word, Jesus Christ, became flesh for us in Christianity. In Islam, the Word did not become flesh but was revealed in a book, the Qur'an. In contrast I recall a comment from a Christian friend in the early days of befriending Muslims.

John, Christianity and Islam are irreconcilable faiths. It's as simple as that, and I can't see how you overcome the roadblock. When you speak to

Muslims, do you speak the truth in love and clarify that there is no other way to be saved than to put your faith and trust in Jesus?

Like my friend, I grew up believing I was responsible for sharing the gospel of *eternal life*, which was only available to those who *accepted Jesus as their Lord and Saviour*. The Bible is clear. For example, Thomas said,

Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?

Jesus answered,

*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*¹⁶

And in Peter's words;

*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.*¹⁷

In the words of Archbishop Rowan Williams in his lecture, [*The finality of Christ in a Pluralistic World*](#);

And so out of these two powerful and heavily-charged texts comes the classic Christian conviction: what we encounter in Jesus Christ is simply the truth. It is the truth about God and the truth about humanity. Not living into that truth and accepting it has consequences because this is the last word about God and God's creation. So we speak of the finality of Christ. There's nothing more to know. Or we speak of the uniqueness of Christ. No one apart from Jesus of Nazareth expresses the truth like this.

¹⁶ John 14: 5—6

¹⁷ Acts 4: 8-13

[Alan Race's](#) threefold typology of exclusivism,¹⁸ inclusivism,¹⁹ and pluralism²⁰ shapes contemporary debates concerning the Christian theology of religions. Yet, the more Muslims I met, witnessing their devout lives and learning about their faith, the more uncertain and troubled I became. I questioned whether these groupings were helpful if I was to get to know and become genuine friends with Muslims and, in that context, have an opportunity to share my faith in the Messiah (Christ) Jesus, who is in eternal relationship with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.

In a [recently published book, Drew Collins](#) explores the theological problem between the linked realities of Jesus' historical particularity and His universal presence. The apparent dichotomy raises difficult questions: Who is Jesus to those who do not know him? Who are those who do not know him to those who do? Do *we* who follow Jesus meet him in *those* who do not? Faced with the rich religious diversity of today's closely interconnected world Collins proposes a Christian theology of religions which does not pit the Christian faith committed to the particularity of Jesus Christ's identity as the Son of God against the possibility of encountering the divine presence in the world at large. Instead, Christian faith becomes a way of exploration, hoping for such encounters with the universal presence of Christ because of the uniqueness of Jesus. Jordan Denari Duffner explores this in her award-winning book [Finding Jesus among Muslims: How Loving Islam Makes Me a Better Catholic](#). In [The Bible and other faiths: what does the Lord require of us?](#) Ida Glaser provides helpful guidance, which, she warns, may be controversial, especially for conservative Christians.

¹⁸ An exclusivist believes that salvation comes through faith in Christ alone; that God only offers special revelation through Israel, Christ and the Bible; and that Christ is Jesus of Nazareth. In light of its exclusive claims, exclusivism strongly emphasises our personal need to spread the message of Christ. Without this message – and an affirmation of a particular doctrinal truth – a person will necessarily go to Hell.

¹⁹ An inclusivist allows for "anonymous Christians" from other religions because salvation is through Christ, but not necessarily explicitly. It is possible for a spiritual seeker to find Christ, even if they meet him through another religion or know him by another name. Special revelation can be possible apart from Christ and Scripture, including finding truth in other religions' sacred texts. The Christ who saves is visible in the person of Jesus but is not limited to him. This perspective emphasises the sovereignty of God and an individual's response to the Holy Spirit more so than evangelism efforts.

²⁰ A pluralist believes that salvation is available through all faiths, whether by denying the inconsistency of these religions or by diminishing the significance of such contradictions. Christ is "cosmic" in that He is merely one option among several. All religion, including Christianity, is humankind's response to the transcendent. There may be mistakes within a particular religious system, but these are to be expected. For a pluralist, what truly matters is not doctrinal correctness but a genuine response of faith to the transcendent God, whoever that God may be. Many, including me, increasingly recognize the insufficiency of this simplistic categorisation.

She separates interfaith questions into two categories.

- First, questions that may not be correct but tend to dominate our religious dialogue. For example, questions focusing on judging other people, *are people from other religions saved? is Jesus the only way to know God?; do other faiths consist of any truth?*
- Second, the more demanding questions relate to our relationships and focus on other people's welfare and our responsibility. Questions such as; *what is God doing among people of other religions?; what does God require of us in response?; how should we respond to other religions? How do we apply the great commission²¹ and commandments²² to our interfaith context?*

I now turn to share ways in which I and others have sought to address these questions.

²¹ Matthew 28:16-20

²²Matthew 22:36-40

4. Windmills or Walls?²³

The University

In the introduction, I wrote about the hospitality Gill and I extended to a few devout Christian and Muslim Dental students – the first step where one step has always led to another and the pilgrimage we never imagined would be so long and rewarding. Subsequent steps led to a series of *Muslim and Christian Perspectives* meetings with the Shia Muslim Society at the University. There was no difficulty agreeing on the aims for the meetings, which were to be held in the main lecture theatre of the University and open to everyone. They were;

- to encourage Muslims and Christians to understand the teachings in their sacred texts better as they relate to the chosen topics,
- to openly recognise significant differences between Islam and Christianity and enjoy conversation in a spirit of mutual respect and genuine friendship.
- to welcome people of other faiths or none who are interested to learn more about Christianity and Islam.

²³ The Chinese Proverb "when the winds of change blow, some people build walls and others build windmills" shows remarkable insight. If you fight against unwanted yet unchangeable circumstances rather than adapt, you're in for a hard time.



Photo John Drummond Clark

We agreed on the meeting format, which was successful and adopted for all subsequent meetings in Dundee and also later in Preston. The meetings were in two halves. The first half allowed each Muslim and Christian speaker 30 minutes (they were told 20 minutes to give some leeway if they overran!). A refreshment break followed the talks, during which the audience was encouraged to mix and converse with one another. After the break, I chaired the Q & A with the speakers, which usually lasted about 45 minutes. Guidance on respectful listening and speaking was given before the Q & A similar to guidelines outlined in the [*Ethical Guidelines for Christian and Muslim Witness in Britain*](#)

The topics for the first four monthly meetings were agreed upon. They were a screening of the film [*The Imam and the Pastor*](#), *Suffering for Righteousness*, *Life After Death* (a joint meeting with the Christian Union) and *Jerusalem*. Each one is a challenging topic, as were the topics for the next three years.

Friendships were made and a small group of Muslims and Christians agreed to meet to use the booklet, *Who is Isa Al-Masih*²⁴ to explore this question. We met in the University Islamic Society prayer room, and it would be dishonest if I said that the thought,


I hope nobody from the nearby Steeple Church sees me entering the prayer room,

²⁴ John Martin (2005) *Who is Isa Al-Masih?* 2005 Authentic Lifestyle


did not cross my mind. I'm sure we all harboured fears about many aspects of the *Muslim & Christian Perspectives* venture on which we had embarked but none were articulated. Fear, lack of accurate information, and religiosity can be hindrances to reaching out to Muslims. But, seeing the examples of Jesus and reading the Scriptural mandates removes all excuses. Scripture does not include any exception clauses excusing Christians from reaching out to Muslims, [regardless of whether they view them as a neighbour or as an enemy.](#)

FORGIVENESS

Muslim & Christian Perspectives




Interfaith Event
with
Guest Speakers



Dr. Chawkat Moucarry (World Vision)
&
Sheikh Ahmad Haneef

Dundee University Tower Extension Lecture Theatre
Thursday 18th November 2010 @ 7pm



**Organised by the Muslim Message Society and Christian Friends
to promote better understanding and peaceful relations**
www.DUSA.co.uk/TheMuslimMessage MMS@dundee.ac.uk

My Church

Several members of my city centre church attended the meetings at the University and were very supportive. It was, therefore, not long before I was looking for opportunities to build windmills with my church and the Muslim community in the nearby Mosque. I soon discovered that the orientation of a Christian community towards the Mosque in their parish requires faith (in God whom we know in the Messiah Jesus), hope, love, patience and wisdom, which I lacked at the time, and I'm sure, still do.

I belong to the Steeple Church, an evangelical Church that takes and seeks to live out the Bible's storyline seriously. The term *evangelical* comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, meaning *good news* or *gospel*. The gospel is the good news that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus marks a pivotal point in history when God fulfils, according to [N.T. Wright, His covenant](#) commitment to defeat the powers of darkness and evil, to forgive our sins, and inaugurate the process of renewing a broken world and broken people. The Steeple Church is situated in the centre of Dundee and dates from 1789. It is part of a building whose origins go back 800 years. Although called the Steeple Church, the structure is dominated by the Tower, which dates from the 15th century. The other parts of the edifice on the east side, the Mary Slessor Centre, named after Mary Slessor²⁵ and Dundee Parish Church (St Mary's), were built in the 1840s after a fire.

²⁵ Born in Aberdeen on the 2nd December 1948, Mary Slessor moved with her family to Dundee when she was 11 years old. Mary worked in Baxter's Mill as a weaver as a young woman. Her mother was a godly Christian woman who took all her children to church. At the Wishart Church (now united with The Steeple Church), Mary heard about missionary work in Africa and all about her hero, David Livingstone. It was after the death of David Livingstone in 1874 and with encouragement from a church friend that Mary began to wonder if she could answer the call to West Africa. After much thought and prayer and many talks with Mr Logie of Tay Square Church, where she helped with Sunday School, she put herself forward in 1875 to The Foreign Mission Board. A short training course in Edinburgh followed, and by the 5th of August 1876, she was on her way from Liverpool to Calabar. Her life journey as a missionary had begun and was to continue for some 39 years.



Photo John Drummond Clark

The sanctuary was traditional, with rows of fixed pews and unsuitable as a contemporary, flexible, and accessible community space, allowing the Church community to fulfil its commitment to serve the needs of the city centre. So, the building was refurbished in 2012, taking as long as one year, which necessitated a temporary relocation to the Dundee University Chaplaincy Centre, where we met to worship on a Sunday morning. In addition, we gathered for informal prayer on Sunday evenings in the adjacent Mary Slessor Centre.

On one such occasion, we went on a prayer walk around the city centre in the vicinity of the Steeple's parish. My small group were allocated a route including the Central Mosque in Brown Street. By about 8 pm, only Dianne and I were left on the walk, and I suggested that we head towards the empty car park of the Mosque and spend a minute or two praying there. As we entered the car park, an older man whom I didn't recognise emerged from the Mosque walking towards us, and heading to the car park exit. Unlike me, Dianne had never visited the Mosque and was unsure of how the man would react. I also wondered, but explained to him why we were there and asked if he would like us to pray with him. We were privileged to be invited to do this, and we prayed for God's blessing on him, his family and his community.

The church refurbishment was completed in 2013, and members and guests were invited to attend the dedication of the refurbished building. I was delighted when Hossein, the Principal of Al Maktoum College and his wife Masoumeh, an academic in the same institution,

accepted my invitation to attend the gathering, which was addressed by the then moderator of the church of Scotland, the Right Revd. Albert Bogle.

By 2016 I was well connected to many in the Sunni community of the Central Mosque, including a young man, Faisal, whom I occasionally met for lunch in Sizzlers, the café adjacent to the Mosque. Faisal founded the [Yusuf Youth Initiative \(YYI\)](#) in 2004, along with a group of enthusiasts who are driven by the desire to work for their community and improve their society. They are a dynamic organisation nurturing leaders of tomorrow and provide enriching programmes that encourage young people to grow, strive and become change-makers in a vibrant and changing society. Faisal is a devout young Muslim passionate about social justice and supporting young people in the Muslim community as they grow up not only to be good Muslims but also who are integrated into society. He agreed that contemporary society also challenges Christians who seek to live a life honouring God, and he often lamented the behaviour of Christian (in his eyes, British) young people today, particularly their sexual ethics.

Down-to-earth as ever, Faisal asked me if he could bring a group of young people to witness our Sunday morning worship from the balcony in the sanctuary. Having already experienced the many good things emanating from our first act of hospitality in our home and the Mosque, I thought it would be self-evident that we should lay on a light lunch after the service with the folk of their age in the church. I thought that the informality of a light lunch, *a shared space*, was an essential part of their visit to the church, but I wanted to confirm with the Minister that this would be all right. The Minister consulted several older and younger leaders within the congregation, and the outcome was that there was to be no hospitality. They were, *of course*, welcome to a service where the hope would be that they would *encounter Jesus*. Instead, there was no hospitality, no lunch and no visit. I was disheartened. It seemed to me that in the Gospels, Jesus was often either on the way to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal.²⁶ For Jesus, discipleship and mission happened around a table, where strangers, enemies and friends joined him. Our homes, our churches, our tables should be spaces for hospitality and fellowship.

²⁶For example, Jesus honoured Zacchaeus by inviting himself to his house where he was welcomed gladly.

The reasons for no post-service hospitality were given in an email which included the following observation;

There might be 'less point' for some form of arranged engagement with a more integrated younger generation than with our generation it's also a generation that's less comfortable with set-up engagements than we are [...] far more comfortable with a let things happen organically in their own way.

and,

Where specifically there is a desire for arranged dialogue re faith issues with Muslims, those gifted and equipped should be involved - it is a skilled theological task.

In hindsight, I recognise myself as at fault for failing to practise double vision. The same double vision I advocate in building relationships with Muslims. My enthusiasm to offer hospitality came from my recent experience from the initial invitation to students to my home and the Muslim and Christian Perspectives meetings at the University. I failed to recognise that not everyone was in the same place as me in their relationship with Muslims and understanding of Islam. I ignored the fact that the Minister was responsible for accommodating a divergence of views within his congregation and keeping the peace. I'm reminded of a conversation many years ago with Bashir, the Chairman of the Central Mosque Committee, who said:

John, you have no idea how hard my job is. We have 35 different nationalities who worship in the Mosque, and it's difficult to keep everyone happy!

Keeping a Mosque congregation together is a similar, if not perhaps a more significant, challenge!

5. Inter Faith Events and Activities



Photo John Drummond Clark

It is easier to bring young Christians and Muslims together outside the church context. A few years later, I contributed to a conference that brought together a group of young Muslims and Christians for a residential weekend in central Scotland. The feedback from the weekend was enthusiastic. For example, one Christian delegate commented,

The willingness of both Muslims and Christians to listen to and learn from one another was wonderful.

Another delegate observed,

The weekend was a brilliant opportunity to learn about each other's beliefs, to ask questions without fear of offending or looking stupid, and to make friendships that hopefully will last far beyond the three days.

A Muslim delegate stated,

Thank you so much. It went pretty well, and I am way more excited about what I learnt about Christianity, communicating and sharing our faiths.

While another said that they would take what they had learned back to their community and,

clear any misconceptions regarding Christianity that I have learned.

The divergence of views within an Evangelical Christian community, such as in my church at that time, was investigated by [Richard McCallum](#). He investigated the responses of British Evangelicals to Muslims since the events of 11th September 2001. The data revealed a marked polarisation among Evangelicals, with an increasingly sharp disagreement between *confrontationalists* and *conciliators*. He concludes:

The increasingly politicised presence of Muslim communities in Britain today is raising issues not only for society in general but for other faith communities as well. Among these, the Evangelical constituency, including the members of various Christian diasporas, is struggling to find a coherent response which is true to its Bible-based, activist roots.

In his [Laing Lecture Colin Chapman](#) describes a similar divergence of views, probably found in many Evangelical church communities today. Richard McCallum summarises the challenge which is to all of us.²⁷

The challenge for British Evangelicals is whether they will be able to adopt a pragmatic, critically engaged orthodoxy that accepts the pluralistic society but does not allow entrenched ghettos; that does not essentialise but promotes rational debate about Islamic texts and history; that works for reciprocity but does not gloss all Muslims as oppressors of minorities; that emphasises equally the dangers of Islamic radicalisation and the rights of ordinary Muslims who have no interest in world

²⁷ in [Guest, M. and Arweck, E. \(2016\). Religion and Knowledge. Routledge.](#) pp115-132

domination; that uses their knowledge of Islam not to promote fear and isolation but to encourage confident engagement.

Change takes time, prayer, work and patience, but does happen. Many years later, I was approached by the leader of the YYI (Yusuf Youth Initiative) Scouts, who asked if it would be possible to visit the Steeple church to fulfil some of the requirements of their World Religions Badge. The new Parish Assistant welcomed the opportunity to extend hospitality and speak to the visitors about Jesus and the practice of the Christian faith. As a former teacher, she knew how to lay on an excellent educational programme which engaged the visitors for the day with a break and a lovely Halal buffet lunch. The Parish Assistant included a short, simplified and very clear, [*Romans Road*](#) talk using a visual aid showing how on the cross Jesus took on Himself the punishment which we deserve making it possible for us to have a relationship with God. The Q&A that followed was interesting. Answering questions about how Jesus was God and, if he was, how God could die on the cross in a way that satisfied their bright young minds was challenging.



Photo John Drummond Clark

Every opportunity to bring young Christians and Muslims together in the spirit of double vision to share life and learn from one another contributes to a healthy society and should be encouraged and welcomed. They are the future of a healthy society where Christians and Muslims live well together and, where necessary, disagree well together. As I had already discovered, there is a view amongst some church leaders and laypersons that talking about faith with Muslims is a *skilled theological task* and should be left to *a few gifted and equipped people*. This is not a view held by Andrew Smith, who, in 2006, with some friends from Birmingham, set up the charity [*The Feast*](#), which developed from the Christian-Muslim youth work he had pioneered as part of the Youth Encounter project for Scripture Union. Since then, the Feast has grown and works in four areas in the UK: Birmingham, Bradford and Keighley, Luton and Tower Hamlets in London; and also in Beirut in Lebanon.

Neither is this the view of the authors of the [*Friendship First*](#) course, which aims to help Christians to approach their Muslim friends confidently by equipping them with the skill and resources needed to be effective witnesses to Jesus Christ. The core aims of this interactive course are to encourage a positive attitude towards Muslim neighbours, provide relevant knowledge about Islam and Muslim countries, and encourage participants to develop sufficient skills to start personal friendships and witness graciously and confidently. It was generally, but on occasion cautiously, well received on the occasions in which I, along with others, ran the course in different evangelical churches.

The transformation of our society from Judeo-Christian values and institutions toward non-religious and secular institutions is challenging for Christians. Our Muslim friends are similarly challenged as they share many of these values. We can lament together, and also perhaps support each other, over the drift toward secularism and the effect this is having on our respective communities.

There are times when we can stand together. In 2009, Dundee City Council proposed renaming the ceremony of switching on the City Square's Christmas tree lights, from Christmas Light Night, to Winter White Light. There was opposition from the Christian community, who were supported by the Mosque chairman, Bashir Chohan, who spoke on behalf of the Muslim community and asked why Christians were not allowed to celebrate Christmas. As a result, the Councillors were persuaded to change their minds. Christmas Light Night went ahead with thousands, including Muslims, packing the city square to see the lights switched on and also a nativity play, directed by a member of our church.

We can stand together on issues of social justice. In 2010 along with others, I organised a meeting in the central Mosque, *Shaping the Future – the Role of Faith in Society*. My young Muslim friend, Faisal and a young Christian friend, Ewan, shared their story of meeting, and how the Muslim community contributed food during Ramadan for Ewan's Discovery Food Programme, which was the precursor to the Dundee Foodbank. Following this, three groups were formed; *Young activists*, *Women*, and *Imams and Pastors*. Each group was asked to share their faith journey, what their faith means as a citizen in Dundee, and their thoughts on the problems in our city. Regarding the latter, it was not surprising that family breakdown, poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, and the secular agenda were shared concerns at the top of each group's list.



Photo John Drummond Clark

Two initiatives evolved from the meeting. The first was a few Muslims and Christians working together on the Discovery Projects, developed by [Signpost International](#) to support homeless people moving into their accommodation, by decorating and furnishing their new homes. The second was the beginning of a Scriptural Reasoning group which ran for several years and is described later.

More recently, Dundee has adopted the *Faith Covenant* and is working with all faith communities to consider the practicalities of implementation. The Faith Covenant was developed by the [All-Party Parliamentary Group \(APPG\) on Faith and Society](#). It was launched in 2012 to highlight the contribution to society by faith-based organisations to promote understanding of the groups providing innovative solutions around the country. A draft [Faith Covenant](#) was developed with principles to guide engagement between faith communities and the local authorities.

Riskier is to stand together on geo-political justice, particularly in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which lies behind much of today's Christian-Muslim tensions. In order to understand this better, in 2011, Gill and I travelled to Israel and the West Bank not with an organised party. We were keen to meet for ourselves Jews and Palestinians, Muslims and Christians in Israel and the West Bank and to listen to their stories. However, we must have appeared suspicious to the officials at Tel Aviv airport, as we were questioned about why we were travelling alone. It was unnerving but could have been worse. We visited many places on the West Bank, including Nablus. Dundee is twinned with Nablus, and in 1980 two years after we came to live in Dundee, controversially, the Palestinian flag flew alongside the flags of the other twin cities above the City Chambers. On two occasions, a group of young Muslim friends from the Yusuf Youth Initiative attempted to visit Nablus to provide practical support to young refugees living in the Balata refugee camp. Their experience at the Allenby Bridge Checkpoint,²⁸ recalled by Raheel, was very different to ours:

It was around 10 hours of interrogation, and at the end of it, we were all denied entry, again through the mercy and wisdom of Allah, Alhamdulillah. This is just a drop in the ocean of what Palestinians endure day in and day out.

Faisal, who was also on this trip, remembers;

I was strip-searched, my bags and mobile phone confiscated and denied access to food for seven hours at the hands of the Israeli authorities.

Faisal is now permanently barred from entering Israel and the West Bank.

²⁸ Access to the West Bank is only possible via Jordan and the Allenby Bridge checkpoint in the Jordan Valley. This checkpoint is accessible by bus or taxi from Amman city in Jordan and takes around an hour to travel.

We can stand together or rather sit together as we share our Scriptures in our secular world. Our Scriptural Reasoning group evolved from the *Shaping the Future – the Role of Faith in Society* meeting. [Scriptural Reasoning \(SR\)](#)

is a tool for inter-faith dialogue whereby people of different faiths come together to read and reflect on their scriptures. Unlike some forms of inter-faith engagement, it is not about seeking agreement but rather exploring the texts and their possible interpretations across faith boundaries and learning to disagree better. The result is often a deeper understanding of others' and one's own scriptures, as well as the development of strong bonds across faith communities. SR is now practised globally, including in places affected by religion-related tensions and conflict.

6. Honest Disagreements

As friendship and trust develop, the conversation will turn to matters of religion and faith; in my experience, that's normal for Muslims, unlike most westerners. This is good, providing the conversations take place in the spirit of the double vision described previously. Without double vision, we risk leaving our conversation with nothing more than an echo chamber simply confirming our biases against the other. In the words of Institute of Middle East Studies (IMES) Director Dr Martin Accad, Muslims and Christians

*have become experts at framing the other's argument against them and building defensive counter-arguments...and this interaction has become repetitive, circular and most often quite sterile.*²⁹

What ultimately results is,

a caricatured representation of 'the other' that only convinces [one's] own circles.

The proliferation of interfaith debates is a perfect example of this reality. Participants inevitably talk past each other to win points for their *own team* at the expense or even humiliation of the other. It was for this reason that I avoid the word debate and prefer *Muslim and Christian Perspectives* or the similarly structured [*Meeting for Better Understanding \(MBU\)*](#).

I've encountered many honest disagreements with Muslims and occasionally Christians too. The most common among Christians is, *do Muslims and Christians worship the same God?* Many books have been written on the subject. Here are two with different conclusions about whether or not Christians and Muslims worship the same God. In his book, [*Allah: A Christian Response*](#), Miroslav Volf says *yes*. Andy Bannister's conclusion in his book, [*Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?*](#) is *no*. His conclusion is based on a not-very highly-developed view of God in the Qur'an, such as the one described by Gabriel Said Reynolds, a leading Qur'anic scholar, in his book [*Allah: God in the Qur'an*](#)

Reynolds explains,

²⁹ For more on this, see [*Accad, M. \(2019\). Sacred Misinterpretation. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.*](#)

“The goal of this book is to uncover the theology of the Qur’an, to explore the Qur’an’s presentation of a God who is both merciful and wrathful. Part of this exploration will involve contrasting the Qur’an with elements of the Bible”. (p 16).
“in this book, I am principally interested in what the Qur’an itself says about God, and not in later theological debates” (p. 10)

Whichever view you hold, I suggest it is more helpful to speak of *our understanding of God* and *their understanding of God* and to avoid using the language of *our God* and *your God*.

Changing Sides

It is not surprising that there will be individuals who convert to Christianity or to Islam. Many meet resistance, hostility and, in some cases, even persecution from the families and neighbourhoods they are leaving. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is regarded as apostasy and deserves anything from ostracization to harsh punishment, and in some countries, death. Muslims know Christian conversion to Islam as *reverting* because they believe everyone is born a Muslim. In many interfaith conversations, conversion is viewed as a topic which is too hot to handle or is left as the unmentionable *elephant in the room*. However, this need not be. During Interfaith Week in Preston in 2013, Greg Smith facilitated a *Conversation about Conversion* attended by Muslims and Christians. Real case studies of the situations faced by young people converting from Islam to Christianity and vice versa were discussed in groups in a non-confrontational manner. The Muslims challenged passages in the Qur’an which seem to advocate death for apostasy as needing to be put in context. It proved to be a very informative and worthwhile meeting which strengthened the relationships between the Muslims and Christians who attended.

However, it is important to recognise that conversion, in either direction, may be an outcome, and to agree, in the following words of the Guidelines for Ethical Witness,

whilst recognising that either community will naturally rejoice with and support those who have chosen to join them, we will be sensitive to the loss that others may feel, and whilst we may feel hurt when someone we know and love chooses to leave our faith, we will respect their decision and will not force them to stay or harass them afterwards.

Theological roadblocks

The theological disagreements with Muslims are obvious. The Trinity, the corruption of the Bible, and *Paul invented Christianity* are, in my experience, most common, along with the often heard, *but we love Jesus too*, to which I respond *which Jesus, the Jesus we read about in the Qur'an or the Jesus we read about in the Bible?* There is no space in this Urban Tract to explore these roadblocks but I encourage readers to investigate them for themselves using the resources found in the bibliography or elsewhere.

7. Final Reflections

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.³⁰*

I am writing this reflection on the day after the United Nations' International Day to Combat Islamophobia, when we are encouraged to take *concrete action in the face of rising hatred, discrimination, and violence against Muslims*.

My journey of discovery has been a rewarding experience but a tiny drop in the 1500 hundred years of Christian-Muslim relations. Have I and others involved in this journey of discovery achieved anything significant to counter the reported rise in hatred, discrimination, and violence against Muslims?

At the global level, that's an impossibly difficult question to answer, but at the one-to-one friendship first level, I dare to think the answer is 'yes.'

For a few years, the Steeple church's doors were open on a Monday afternoon for anyone to drop in and speak with volunteers about the history of the building or their concerns and worries. On one occasion, a young Muslim girl entered the church. She was anxious and agitated and explained to Dona that she was a Muslim and had just been discharged from Carseview, the mental health unit at Ninewells Hospital. Although from England, she wanted to go to Edinburgh but couldn't afford a bus ticket. I phoned Imam Zuber, who willingly came to the church to join Dona to speak with her. However, they were concerned that she didn't have a contact in Edinburgh, so Zuber phoned a colleague who agreed to meet her in Edinburgh and offer help. Dona and Zuber took her to the bus Station, purchased a ticket, bought tea and cake and saw her safely onto the bus.

Another very different memory of putting *friendship first* comes to mind. I became friends with a Muslim man of a similar age whose daughter came to faith in Jesus and was baptised.

³⁰ A Great wagon, Rumi

This caused considerable rifts in family relationships and a strain on our friendship. However, by practising *double vision* and imagining how I would feel if my daughter converted to Islam, I could empathise with and support him in his pain in a small way.

So, not least in the area of Christian-Muslim relations, we should endeavour to live out Jesus' command, *Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.*' and *'Love others as well as you love yourself'*³¹, and to recognise that *the wind* [of the Holy Spirit] *blows wherever it pleases. [and that we] hear its sound but cannot tell where it originates or is going.*³²



Photo John Drummond Clark

³¹ Matthew 22:37-40. The Message

³² Adapted from John 3:8

8. Questions to Ponder

- How well do you know your Muslim community? Have you visited their shops, community centres and mosques? Does it matter if you haven't? Is it better to keep yourself to yourself?
- Do you know why Muslims came to live in your city or locality? What are the challenges they encounter, particularly the second and third generations? Are there ways in which you can support them?
- What are today's challenges for Islam in the West?
- How do you respond to an Islamophobic comment made by your friend?
- Do you have any Muslim friends? Have you engaged with any on questions of faith? What do you agree about, and what do you disagree about? How do you manage your disagreements?
- Is it necessary for Christians to have a basic understanding of Islam and vice versa? If so, where do you go to learn?
- Should Christians and Muslims avoid discussing their faith in the public square and focus on living well together in their city?

9. Useful Resources

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The Centre for Muslim Christian Studies at Oxford (<https://www.cmcsoxford.org.uk>) is a repository of very useful resources.

This Christian centre brings Muslims and Christians together to relate honestly, think rigorously, and explore our respective traditions and religious texts through teaching, research, discussion, and public education.

Introducing the Qur'an

Dr Nicolai Sinai, Professor of Islamic Studies at the Faculty of Oriental Studies, presents this mini-series of four brief talks that introduce central aspects of current research dealing with the historical context and literary character of the scripture of Islam.

<https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/introducing-quran>



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