

# Preface

Why is it so important for Christians in the West to know about Islam? The simplest answer is that Islam has become part of the western world. Lance Morrow, in a *Time* essay last May on the book *The Satanic Verses*, praised 'Rushdie's brilliant perception of what the planet had become: old cultures in sudden high-velocity crisscross, a bewilderment of ethnic explosion and implosion simultaneously.' For 1400 years Islam has been part of the Christian memory: a memory of conflicts but also of partnerships. This new jolt to that memory, this crisscross, began, perhaps, with the first experience of modern Muslim power in the oil embargo of 1973. The awareness has been heightened by the contemporary phenomenon of a Gaddafi in Libya, of Khomeini and the Islamic revolution in Iran, of the PLO and the plight of the Palestinians (most of whom we assume to be Muslim, when, in fact, some of the leaders and many of the radicals are Christian), of the endless bleeding of Beirut and now Azerbaijan. And, for those in England, last year's demonstrations against Rushdie's book. All of these are elements in the new world of the western Christian. But this is not to *know about* Islam, or about Muslims.

When Salman Rushdie's book appeared, the outrage throughout the Muslim world was largely unintelligible to Westerners, who could not comprehend how a book, a novel at that, could arouse such passions. At that time, *New Blackfriars* (March 1989) offered the theoretical possibility of Christians in the West acting as 'honest brokers' between post-Enlightenment western culture and modern Islam. To think of oneself as an 'honest broker', is, we now realise, if not arrogant, at the very least presumptuous.

It seemed better, therefore, to let Muslims (with one exception) speak for themselves in this number, rather than let Christian interpreters try to do it for them. And Muslims have also helped to decide what should be in this number. It does not contain articles explicitly on the Qur'an or Islamic theology or spirituality (subjects which could not have been worthily handled in the space) but on Muslims' understanding of themselves and of they relate—or should relate—to the world.

It is important for us western Christians to listen to what they have to say, to understand them, in order to understand our world—and ourselves. In the thirteenth century, the Latin church's confrontation with Greek thought brought about a revolutionary self-understanding. The confrontation with the rationality of the Enlightenment and the revolutionary period of 18th and 19th century Europe presented another such challenge to Christian self-understanding—a challenge which the church largely failed to meet. Are we ready today, in the church's meeting with Islam, for results that may prove even more dramatic than that initial shift of thinking over 700 years ago? The realisation that Islam is part of our world has implications for us in the way we think about the church, about Jesus, and about ourselves.

This meeting invites us to move from agenda to adventure. To move from an understanding of the church's mission as programme for action to

a waiting on God and a sharing in God's great adventure. One thing the experience of dialogue with believers from other traditions has done is remind us that God's purposes are so much broader than ours; the kingdom so much more than the church; and that it is time to redefine mission as cooperating with those other believers so that God's purposes be revealed.

This meeting reminds us that the Jesus of faith is a beckoning God. He is not found in the past, but in the future, and he who is Lord of history reveals himself, little by little, in the present, and especially when Muslims and Christians meet: Jesus, incarnate and being incarnated, Jesus, who is 'in us,' as St Paul says, but as 'hope' and as 'mystery' (Col 1.28). We are invited to 'keep our eyes fixed on (him) the pioneer' (Heb 12.1–2), who is way out ahead of us, never caught-up-with, whom the Qur'an calls 'the traveller' and 'the one on the path'. We are beckoned to take the road, not toward certainty, but toward mystery and into deeper faith.

Perhaps the most important reason why we should know about Islam is this: Islam challenges us to a new understanding of ourselves as Christian. It is the other emerging on the horizon of our Christian world who reveals to us who we really are. To accept this is to move beyond dialogue, as something we do, to a dialogical way of living. This 'way of being' enters into the very definition of who we are and of what it means to be a Christian now in this religiously pluralistic world.

To come to this realisation is to experience that 'cultural implosion' which destroys defensive walls and lets in new light. A light by which we can see that we are not isolated one from another, and that not one of our most firmly held prejudices is invulnerable to outside influence. At a recent meeting in Rome of Christians working in Muslim countries, Dr Muhammad Lyazghi, a Moroccan jurist, asked Christian participants in dialogue to be patient and not to be discouraged by lack of response. 'Muslims', he said, 'are in a period of transition where they first have to dialogue with each other, but this will lead to a time when people will allow Muslims and Christians to be together.' It is often said that Muslims are not interested in dialogue, but in many cases—Pakistan for one—dialogue began not at the insistence or initiative of Christians but of Muslims!

We are exhorted 'not to forget to welcome strangers, for by so doing, some people have entertained angels without knowing it.' (Heb 13.2) The reference here is to Abraham's welcoming three strangers at Mamre: they share a meal under a terebinth tree and deliver a message of promise and hope, thus changing the fortunes of Abraham and his family. What is implied here is thus much more than 'hospitality', for the Greek word, *philozenia*, means not welcoming strangers, but rather *loving* them. What brings us together is love—and perhaps we need to believe and accept that Muslims love us—but it is difference, after all, that makes love possible.

How could we not be changed after welcoming strangers this way into our home? Could it be that the real reason it is so important for Christians to know about Islam is that our Mamre, our halt on the journey, is today's world, and Muslims are the strangers who join us, angels bearing God's message of a future different from the one we imagined?

CHRIS McVEY OP