

The Challenge of Islam:

The study of Islam, a particular concern with Christian-Muslim relations, and research into interreligious dialogue more broadly are fields of interest I have grown into over recent years. However, the earliest—somewhat indirect—contact I recall having with Islam was travelling on a ship, the MV Kuala Lumpur, in the days when it spent half the year plying pilgrims from Malaysia to Mecca, and the other half ferrying tourists and schoolboys from New Zealand around the Pacific. In 1966 I was one of a party of such boys enjoying the adventure of a seventeen-day educational cruise. We were quartered in the bow section, which was permanently set up as dormitories for the Muslim pilgrim trade. The mid-section of the ship had been converted to accommodate first-class tourist passengers. Little did I know that, years later, I would make a number of visits to the city after which the ship was named.

The first, in 1990, was to attend an International Conference on Islamic Civilisation. This was held under the auspices of the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism and Culture and the Islamic Affairs Division of the Prime Minister's Department. It was a most informative and worthwhile event for a non-Muslim New Zealander (or 'Kiwi') to attend. At the time I was teaching Islam as part of an introductory course in Religious Studies at the University of Waikato; indeed this was something relatively new to me as only two years previously, from a background in philosophy and theology, I had been appointed the foundation lecturer in Religious Studies at what was then New Zealand's newest University. This conference was my first opportunity to have contact with Islam outside of New Zealand. I found myself in a triple minority—one of only a handful of Westerners, the only representative from New Zealand, and thus the only non-Muslim New Zealander. For me that conference was very revealing and stimulating. Speakers, both Muslim and non-Muslim, came from many parts of the globe.

Many issues were addressed, but the underlying theme was the question: whether Islam in the contemporary world? Questions of Islamic civilisation and western modernity were tackled by a number of speakers who gave both an insightful critique of modern secularised mentality and cultural norms, and also some penetrating self-reflective analysis of Islam in relation to that. A number of possibilities for further research and investigation suggested themselves to me, among them the issue of the ways in

which each religious community perceives the other as religiously and ideologically 'other'; the way in which Islam is perceived by the West in general; and the prospect for engaging in theological dialogue that goes beyond polite, mutually monological, presentations of the status quo.

I returned to Kuala Lumpur in 1995 for a brief period as a visiting scholar to the International Islamic University Malaysia in order to give a series of seminars on dialogical matters, and to speak also at the University of Malaya and the National University of Malaysia. This was followed the next year by attendance at an International Seminar on Islamic Theology and Philosophy at the National University of Malaysia. These visits afforded opportunity to pursue some lines of research and thought, and to sound them out in the context of actual dialogical engagement. This had also been the case with my encounters with Islam and Muslims in Birmingham, England, when I undertook a period of sabbatical leave in 1993, spending much of my time working at the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations. While there I had the opportunity to participate in a Summer School on Islam and Christianity at which I co-led, with a Muslim colleague from Malaysia, a theology dialogue group that met daily for the duration of this eight-day event.

Further, and also in 1995, I had the privilege of travelling to Egypt to attend, as a guest of the Egyptian Ministry of *Waqfs* (Religious Affairs) and *Al-Azhar* University, the convention of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs. This event was held in Alexandria and my attendance there was the result of being nominated by Muslim leadership in New Zealand. This was a rare opportunity for a distant New Zealander, and one that was both stimulating and instructive. It gave me, quite literally, a front seat perspective onto the then contemporary world of Islam and the dynamics that operate within the context of a major international Islamic gathering. The paper I had been asked to prepare was included in the published pre-conference material. I was graciously hosted by the Egyptians, just as I had also been by the Malaysians when in Kuala Lumpur. A number of other international travel experiences and research opportunities in recent years have allowed me to gain further knowledge of, and insight into, the wider dimensions of the relationship between Islam and Christianity and the broader context of Christian-Muslim dialogical activities.

This book is a limited and tentative attempt to explore some of the concerns and issues that have exercised me in the field of Christian-Muslim encounter over the past decade and more. It is a small contribution to a vast ongoing conversation. While seeking to maintain my integrity as a critically reflective Christian theologian and scholar of religion, I seek nevertheless to engage empathetically with, and to deepen my understanding of, Islam. Indeed, I am of the opinion that there is much in Islam that can be affirmed in good faith by a Christian. I would like to think that the reverse is also true. Much the same could be said with respect to Jewish-Muslim relations also. The ongoing challenge is to tease out what these affirmations might be, and how they might be appropriately expressed, both to the honour of each and to the honour of the One God in whom all three religions believe. In all I seek to affirm the integrity of the process of dialogical engagement, and to respect the uniqueness and integrity of my dialogical partner as the religious 'other', with whom I am challenged to relate to, and engage with, in interfaith encounter.

The main corpus of this book is divided into three parts. Part I constitutes an introduction to Islam. It is my attempt to meet the primary—and preliminary— challenge of interfaith encounter, namely, of understanding the religious 'other' with whom I am to engage in dialogue. This intellectual task is a necessary concomitant to real-life encounter. There are, of course, many introductory works on Islam, and many that are more substantial and far ranging than I have attempted here. My intention is to serve the reader who is interested in dialogical issues with Islam and who needs to have immediately to hand a succinct introduction to the religion, or at least something sufficiently substantial, but not overwhelming, to refer to. For the reader already familiar with the Muslim religion, this section can be skipped over. However I am of the view that, apart from academic professionals and others highly versed in Islam, all 'introductions' serve the purpose of reinforcing knowledge and expanding understanding. For, as with other non-Muslim writers on Islam, each author has his or her own interpretive slant and presentational perspective. So the non-specialist reader ought to gain something instructive and illuminating yet, of course, ought also to consult other works on Islam in the quest to gain a fuller and deeper understanding.

The remainder of the book is divided thematically into two parts. Part II explores some elements of prospects for dialogue, in particular the patterns and paradigms of interfaith engagement which

may be discerned from a review of the history of Christian-Muslim encounter, on the one hand, and the trajectory of Jewish-Muslim relations on the other. Chapter 8 then explores issues of contemporary Muslim identity and ideology, which are imperative to grasp if dialogical encounter is to be rooted in the real world. In Part III, I make a tentative start on the business of dialogical engagement by way of discussing a number of pertinent issues, ranging from matters of media-driven perceptions of Islam to some thorny theological topics.

As with many scholars in the Western world, I have had numerous speaking engagements and allied opportunities for reflection and writing in the wake of the rise of interest—if not outright concern and anxiety—in things Islamic following the ‘Terrible Events of September Eleven’ (TESE), 2001. Like it or not, we live in a post-TESE (or post-9/11, to use the more common-place short-hand reference) world. Global affairs and our nightly newscasts remain dominated by troubling events of the world of Islam. The imperative to understand and dialogically engage with Muslims and the religion of Islam is urgent and paramount. I trust my work will assist the reader to do just that.

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