

Explaining Islam

by J. M. Gaskell



Islam from a Catholic Perspective



CTS EXPLANATIONS

Catholic Truth Society Publications Distributed by Ignatius Press

Catholic Truth Society and Ignatius Press have joined forces to make CTS's outstanding booklets available in North America. CTS booklets explain the faith, teaching, and life of the Catholic Church. They are based on Sacred Scripture, the Second Vatican Council documents, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. These booklets provide authentic Catholic teaching; they address issues of life and truth which are relevant to all. They aim to inform and educate readers on the many issues that people have to deal with today.

www.ignatius-cts.com

All rights reserved. Copyright © 2003, The Incorporated Catholic Truth Society of London. Distributed in North America by Ignatius Press, San Francisco, CA.

ISBN 978 1 86082 183 7

Front cover image: Copyright © Corbis Images.

Explaining

ISLAM

by
Jeremy M. Gaskell

*All booklets are published thanks to the
generous support of the members of the
Catholic Truth Society*



CATHOLIC TRUTH SOCIETY
PUBLISHERS TO THE HOLY SEE

CONTENTS

Introduction	3
The Rise of Islam	8
Islamic Belief	23
Muslim Religious Practice	51
The Spread of Islam	72
Catholic-Muslim Relations	80

The Author

Jeremy Gaskell's interest in Islam was kindled during a visit to the Holy Land shortly after the 1967 Six Day War. In the 1970s he studied Theology at Bristol University since then he has worked in Education and Professional Training in the United Kingdom and the Middle East. He writes extensively on a wide range of matters including history, legal history and ethics.

INTRODUCTION

There are perhaps a thousand million inhabitants of our world who, singly or collectively, prostrate themselves five times every day before the Unseen God. Just as the preaching of the Apostles two millennia ago confronted the pagan world with a proclamation that required a response, Islam presents a challenge to the secularist as much as to the Christian in the modern world. The latter is often in a quandary, unsure whether Islam is a potential ally against the excesses of humanism and globalisation, or whether the secularist is an ally against religious extremism.

Now that the world is more than ever before a 'global village' we must strive for a more profound understanding than the superficial view that is so often found in studies in comparative religion. Catholic readers will wish to gain some insight into what their Muslim neighbours actually believe and so attain a better perception of what Islam stands for. However, it has not been possible within the covers of a short work such as this to give equal treatment to every relevant topic.

The author has contented himself with addressing themes that shed light on some of the larger questions that beset the reader with little previous knowledge of the subject matter. While some aspects of Islamic culture are

only sparingly discussed, others receive much fuller treatment. The criteria for making this selection include both the availability or otherwise of similar information elsewhere and what light any particular topic throws on Muslim self-understanding. Accordingly certain sections, such as that on the *Hajj* Pilgrimage, are longer than might otherwise have been expected. It is hoped above all that the present work succeeds in stimulating a wider and deeper understanding of the Islamic faith, which, among non-Muslims, by and large remains the preserve of specialists.

The term 'Islam', which is derived from the Arabic '*salaam*' - itself the equivalent of the Hebrew '*shalom*' - signifies the peace that comes from accepting the sovereignty of the Divine Will. Christians of all denominations will know something of the peace "which surpasses all understanding" (*Ph* 4:7) and Catholics in particular recall the famous words of St Augustine of Hippo about the heart being restless "until it rests in Thee". In 1959, before he was elected Pope Paul VI, Cardinal Giovanni-Batista Montini set the tone for the latter part of the twentieth century and beyond:

Catholics must feel themselves universal. A clear univocal adherence to Christ preserves them from an eclectic, doctrinally soft and equivocal eirenicism. But an inward urge impels them to try and understand other human circumstances, whether distant or close at hand. They try, with affection and respect, to offer to others their treasure of charity and truth.

The fear at the back of the minds of many people is that a 'clash of civilisations' could erupt on a broad front between the Islamic world and the so-called 'Christian West'. Ironically, however, the conflict at its profoundest level is not between Christianity and Islam but between a world view that has God at its centre and the contemporary phenomenon, more prevalent in Europe than in North America, known as secular humanism. Mere dialogue between Christian and Muslim scholars, accordingly, cannot be expected to have more than a limited effect in reducing tension. There is much to be gained, however, by Christian theologians patiently pointing out that Islam's conflict with the West is no longer a clash with a specifically Christian civilisation. Indeed the many who have compassion for those Muslims who always seem to be disadvantaged by the present dispensation in world affairs are potential allies. Correspondingly, people in the West need to bear in mind that the attitude of the governments of Muslim nations to world affairs, as well as that of their peoples, is more specifically religious than is generally realised. The rise of Islam during the one hundred years following the death of its 'founder' in 632 AD is one of the most remarkable historical phenomena ever to have occurred. Unsurprisingly its early successes were - and still are - considered sufficient proof of Divine approval of the zeal of the new faith's members:

“Imagine a state humbled after having been glorious, weak after being powerful, plundered after having ruled, and oppressed after once having been flourishing. Then try to discern the causes of its first rise to power, imagine the blows that led to its disintegration and the seeds of its sickness. Is it not religion that caused that state’s most important principles to flourish, that united its individual members, that raised its head high above other nations and led it by well-chosen laws? Is it not religion with strong principles and fixed rules of conduct, comprising all types of government and calling aloud for unity in friendship and love, keeping hearts pure from sensual things, lighting up the mind with rays of truth from the origin of all things, and supplying stones enough to build the edifice of society? Men need such a religion: it preserves this society and at the same time it preaches faith in all types of civilisation.” (Quoted by Arnold Hottinger in *The Arabs*, Thames & Hudson, 1963)

These words show how closely the threads of nationalism and religious sentiment can be intertwined. History teaches us how easily laudable idealism can be diverted towards ends that are intrinsically evil. However, our present purpose is less to disentangle the long skeins of Islamic history, culture and belief than to gain a perspective of Islam in the context of the long Scriptural tradition that preceded it.

The textual references have been taken from Professor A.J. Arberry’s magisterial *The Koran Interpreted* (1955)

and, unless otherwise stated, from *The General Prescripts of Belief in the Qur'an and Sunnah* by A. Abdul-Khaliq, published in Riyadh.

THE RISE OF ISLAM

On a first reading it is not easy to see that the short chapters or *surahs* ('rows') found at the end of the *Qur'an* date from considerably earlier than the long, rather stylised ones found at the beginning. The content of each reflects the historical context within which it was formed. Very often an incident in Muhammad's life was the occasion of one of the passages of the *Qur'an*. Some knowledge of Muhammad's life and times is, therefore, indispensable to a proper understanding of the rise of Islam.

By the time that Muhammad began preaching he was already over forty years of age. A year or two earlier he had commenced making periodic retreats lasting a number of days to a cave outside Mecca. It was here one night in August 610 that he first received a profound sense of revelation. Bathed in light, an angelic being identified with the Biblical seraph Gabriel approached in human form holding a silken sheet covered in Arabic script. Muhammad heard the command, "Qara!" meaning both "Read!" and "Recite!" It is from this word that *Qur'an* (Recital) is derived. The words Muhammad recited aloud and memorised for posterity form *surah* 96, entitled 'The Bloodclot', which commences:

Recite: in the name of thy Lord who created Man of a bloodclot.
Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous, who taught by the pen,
taught Man that which he knew not.

The first people to believe Muhammad's claim to have been selected as a Divine Messenger (*rasoul*) were his wife Khadijah, twelve years his senior, his young cousin Ali, and his adopted son Zaid bin Haritha, a former slave whom Muhammad had freed. During the following two years Muhammad converted a number of friends and acquaintances to the belief in a single, transcendent Deity whose sovereign will governs the laws of nature and the affairs of mankind. 'Islam' - complete surrender or submission to the will of this God - was the principal characteristic of Muhammad's Companions or Assistants (*ansar*). Three of these - Abu Bakr as-Saddiq ('the Upright'), Umar ibn al-Khattab and Uthman (or Osman) ibn Affan - were in turn Caliph (Successor) after Muhammad's death. The support of the Assistants (or 'Helpers'), 43 in all, was to prove invaluable from 613 onwards when Muhammad began to face hostility and ridicule from many including members of his own family after preaching at the famous Ka'aba at Mecca (see p. 12).

Formative Influences

Muhammad grew up in a polytheistic culture in which monotheistic teachings had become known through outside influences. It is well known for instance that the

Negus of Ethiopia was Christian. In the sixth century there was even a bishopric of southern Arabia, established by St Gergentius. Mecca's geographical location, the dramatic adjacent landscape and the ferocity of the desert tribes, meant that the city had always escaped the reach of the two principal regional empires - Christian Byzantium situated on the landbridge between Europe and Asia, and Zoroastrian Iran (Persia). Mecca was already established as a place of pilgrimage - indeed its local commercial pre-eminence depended on its being so. Pious traditions associating the Ka'aba with the names of Adam and Abraham were perhaps already in existence. In addition to the God of whom Adam and Abraham were to be regarded as prophets, a further 360 deities of both sexes were worshipped. It is known, however, that long before Muhammad uttered his famous saying, "La ilah illah Allah" ('There is no deity but God') there were monotheists in Arabia. Known as the *hanifa* they were of pivotal importance in Arabian history, but little is known of their core beliefs.

Born in either 569 or 571, Muhammad was an orphan from the age of six. For the next two years he was cared for by his grandfather until he too died and his uncle, Abu Talib, became his guardian. Muhammad cared for his uncle's flocks and accompanied him on trading caravans to Damascus where they encountered Christian worship. By his early twenties Muhammad was known to the inhabitants

of Mecca as 'al-Amin' - the trustworthy. Accordingly he was engaged by a well-to-do widow, Khadijah bint Khuwailid, to manage her commercial transactions on caravans to Syria. Muhammad married Khadijah in 595 and, until his experiences in the cave, we may imagine him living as a family man without financial worries. To all intents and purposes Muhammad remained a traditional polytheist. However Khadijah's cousin, Waraqa ibn Naufal, transcribed Hebrew gospels at this time. It is likely, if not quite certain, that these were canonical gospels but we must bear in mind that a number of documents giving gnostic and other radically different interpretations of the life and teachings of Jesus were in circulation. Certainly Waraqa, together with a few others known to Muhammad, withdrew from idol worship in the years after Muhammad's marriage so that by the time he commenced his meditations in the cave Muhammad was undoubtedly a seeker after the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The Meccan Period

From 613-622 Muhammad's preaching career was centred on Mecca, whose affairs were under the control of the Quraish tribe of which Muhammad's family was part. Had he been able to persuade his kinsmen and compatriots there to accept his doctrine, Muhammad might never have entertained wider ambitions. His preaching, which combined graphic accounts of the penalties for personal

sin with poetic accounts of the mercies and rewards of Paradise (*Jannah*) that could be expected by those who submitted to God's will. The nature of the opposition to Muhammad can be discerned clearly in the references to Noah in the *Qur'an*, especially in *surah* 11:25ff:

And we sent Noah to his people: 'I am for you a warner, and a bearer of good tidings: serve you none but God. I fear for you the chastisement of a painful day.' Said the Council of the unbelievers of his people, 'We see thee not other than a mortal like ourselves, and we see not any following thee but the vilest of us inconsiderately. We do not see you have over us any superiority; no, rather, we think you are liars ... [W]henver a council of his people passed by him they scoffed at him. He said, 'If you scoff at us, we shall surely scoff at you, as you scoff, and you shall know to whom will come a chastisement degrading him and upon whom shall alight a lasting chastisement.'

Muhammad's guardian Abu Talib, who never became a Muslim, was able, until his death, to keep at bay those factions of the Quraish who feared the spread of Muhammad's message. When in 615 the opposition to Muhammad's followers grew intense, a number of them sought refuge in Ethiopia where the Negus enquired as to their doctrine. The Disbelievers in Mecca attempted to have this band of Muslims extradited but the Negus refused, finding in their doctrine nothing that was antithetical to Christian belief. Although the relations between Muslims and Christians became more complex

later, there is no doubt that Muhammad had respect and even affection for the few Christians he knew at this stage in his career:

“...and thou wilt surely find the nearest of them in love to the believers are those who say, ‘we are Christians’; that, because some of them are priests and monks, and they wax not proud, and when they hear what has been sent down to the Messenger, thou seest their eyes overflow with tears because of the truth they recognise...”
(*Qur’an* 5:82-83)

A social boycott of Muhammad’s clan, the Hashemi, was now organised by others of the Quraish who had most to lose if Muhammad ever achieved political influence in Mecca. It is important to realise that Muhammad’s preaching contained the germ of a political programme from the outset. As events would prove subsequently, he had a statesman-like grasp of what was achievable politically both at home and abroad.

In December 619 Khadijah, who had been Muhammad’s mainstay for quarter of a century, died. Just a month later Muhammad married a widow of his own age; there were in fact eleven or twelve other women who became either wives or concubines over the remaining twelve years of Muhammad’s life. Within a month of Khadijah’s death Muhammad suffered a second heavy loss, that of his uncle Abu Talib. Suddenly Muhammad’s position in Mecca was dramatically transformed. Under continuing pressure from

the Disbelievers, the new head of the Hashemi, Abu Lahab, withdrew support from Muhammad (*Qur'an* 111). At the lowest ebb of his fortunes Muhammad departed for Ta'if some three days walk from Mecca high up in the south-west highlands. Here he might quietly have considered his next move but he felt impelled to seize the opportunity to preach his singular message once again. The townspeople greeted him with scorn surpassing that heaped on him in Mecca. After ordering Muhammad's expulsion some of the elders instructed boys to pelt him with stones as he left town. Blood-spattered and utterly forlorn he made a moving plea to God for comfort and support and in due course someone living on the outskirts of Ta'if sent his slave, a Christian as it so happens, with provisions for him.

Muhammad found refuge once more in Mecca and determined either to continue preaching or to find a new base from which to operate. The inhabitants of the oasis town of Yathrib, some 250 miles to the north, were in the habit of making the pilgrimage to Mecca and Muhammad made a point of preaching to these pilgrims in particular. By making converts he was able to persuade a number of them to pledge support in case, as seemed increasingly likely, a safe haven proved necessary.

Following Muhammad's return there was no real possibility of achieving a *modus vivendi* with the Disbelievers in Mecca without compromise on the principle of the Unity of God. One morning in 621

Muhammad astounded his listeners by claiming to have been to Jerusalem overnight. Many scoffed and some of the Believers fell away. Muslims today hold that, although his body did not leave his bed, the event actually took place by means of the mythical flying horse al Buraq, and that in Jerusalem he was granted a vision of heaven by means of a transport or ascent (*miraj*). This episode has certain similarities with a spiritual experience narrated by St Paul (2 Co 12:2-7) but should not be compared directly with the Ascension of Christ.

Early in 622 Muhammad knew he would have to depart. He instructed the Muslims in Mecca, subsequently known as the *Muhajareen*, to go to Yathrib and prepare for his arrival. In July Muhammad left under cover of darkness to escape the malice of the Disbelievers. This is the famous Hegira (*Hijrah*), a word often rendered in English as 'flight', although 'emigration' would be more accurate. It is this event that the Muslim calendar takes as its starting point, the letters 'A.H.' standing for '*Anno Hegirae*'. Thereafter Yathrib was to be known as *Madinah al-Nabi* - 'City of the Prophet' - and *Madinah al Munawwarah*, 'the Shining City', or simply 'Medina'.

Although welcomed by the converts he had made during the recent pilgrimage seasons, Muhammad faced the difficulty of finding a means of sustenance. This he overcame by the time-honoured means of raiding the Meccan caravans as they returned laden from Damascus

via the traditional route running parallel to the Red Sea. When blood was first shed by an over-enthusiastic Muslim the following year, Muhammad let his anger be known as this action was a grave breach of the convention of never attacking one's own clan. A second difficulty, the question of universal recognition of his status, was, ultimately, to prove insoluble without recourse to a policy tantamount to enforced Islamisation. Such a course of action, in 623, was still some years away and Muhammad first pointed to the simple faith of Abraham as a means of uniting the different monotheistic groups under his leadership (*Qur'an* 3:65).

Whereas the opposition in Mecca had come from clan elders suspicious of innovation and jealous of their traditional rights, the most articulate opposition in Medina came from the relatively large Jewish population. Probably most if not all of Medina's Jews were descendants of converts over the preceding centuries (cf. *Mt* 23:15; *Jn* 7:35). Certainly they did not consider Muhammad sufficiently well educated for his claims to a divinely ordained role to be taken seriously and they tended to laugh behind their hands when they heard such stories as that of Abraham being cast into the fiery furnace (*Qur'an* 37:83-109). After a while they agreed to prevent Muhammad gaining access to the Hebrew Scriptures.

As a consequence of increasing antagonism (*Qur'an* 6:92f.) Muhammad laid down some rules in addition to the five-times-daily worship that he had first instructed his

followers to observe in 621. The most notable innovation, in late 623 or early 624, was the instruction that the direction (*qibla*) of prayers should no longer be towards Jerusalem but towards Mecca. The call to prayer (*azan*) and the Ramadan (see p. 54) fast were also instituted at this time. The feasts of Eid al-Fitr at the end of Ramadan and the Eid al-Adha in the pilgrimage season were introduced the following year.

The Struggle for Supremacy AD 624-628

Provoked by Muhammad's caravan raiding and, especially, by the shedding of blood, the Disbelievers sent an expeditionary force which arrived at Medina in January 624, confident they could defeat Muhammad's allies. They met at the battle of Badr, an engagement that, despite its low casualties, was epoch-making. The Muslims gained a great psychological boost from their initial victory and the Disbelievers faced the sudden realisation that their enemies now constituted a force to be reckoned with.

Muhammad's enemies in Mecca returned the following spring and fought the indecisive battle of Uhud with them on the edge of the high ground just north of Medina. Many Muslims were killed in this engagement, the people having persuaded Muhammad to fight in the open rather than risk the destruction of their crops during a protracted siege. The Meccans, however, failed to take advantage of the favourable position which temporary Muslim disarray afforded them with the result that

Muhammad was able to consolidate his position in Medina still further. Intrigue by Muhammad's Arab opponents there now became intense and agitation was mounted by some of the Qurayzah, one of the Jewish clans, who felt under threat.

Umar ibn al-Khattab, one of Muhammad's early converts, now persuaded his mentor that he had a divine commission to spread the rule of Islam by all legitimate means including, so it was believed, force of arms. Accordingly a raid (*razzia*) was launched against Duamat al-Jandal in the north (August 626).

Probing reconnaissances and continuing skirmishing elsewhere persuaded the Disbelievers to mobilise an army from Mecca and the tribes round about, known as the Confederates, for another expedition against the Muslims. First Muhammad ensured that there was sufficient food to withstand a siege if necessary, and then ordered the digging of a trench running right across the western approaches to the city. This had the desired effect on many of Muhammad's adversaries when they made their move in late February 627, for, realising that they could not score a quick victory, they began to melt away so that before long there were insufficient forces to mount an assault on the town.

Once the Confederates had departed Muhammad offered the Qurayzah clan the stark choice of conversion or death. When they replied that they would never

abandon the Law of Moses, Muhammad applied the relevant provisions of the Mosaic code for the liquidation of opposition in time of war (*Dt* 20:10-20; *Qur'an* 33:26). One cannot pass over this terrible event without remarking that both the nature of Jewish opposition to Muhammad and his extreme reaction to it still play their part in the formation of uncompromising attitudes to this day.

The aims of the Muslims were now both limitless and irrepressible. Muhammad's foremost ambition was to establish exclusively Muslim rule throughout the Arabian Peninsula. To achieve this, everybody knew, he had to gain control of Mecca. In the meantime he sent out letters of invitation (*da'wah*) to the leading statesmen and authorities of his day to join Islam. These met with different reactions, some hostile, others more diplomatic, in the various capitals to which they had been sent.

In September 629 the Muslims suffered their first serious reverse since the battle of Uhud four and a half years previously. A raiding party was checked at Mu'ta, south east of the Dead Sea by forces of the Byzantine Empire. Some notable Muslims died in this engagement, including Muhammad's adopted son Zaid, one of his first converts, and Ali's brother Ja'afar not long returned from Ethiopia. The latter is said to have continued fighting even after losing both arms. The survivors struggled back to Medina where they were pelted with dirt by the inhabitants. It is thought likely that those

verses of the *Qur'an* which list Christians among the ranks of the *Kufar* or 'Kaffirs' (the term usually translated as Disbelievers, but literally signifying lack of gratitude) date from this time. The response of the Muslim leaders to the humiliation of Mu'ta was to return and subject the tribes who dwelt on the remote borders of Syria to their rule.

Muhammad prepared the ground to accomplish his goal of taking control of Mecca with notable caution. For nearly two years after the Battle of the Ditch an uneasy truce existed between Mecca and Medina. Eventually blood was spilt for which the Meccans collectively refused to pay 'blood-money'. This entitled the Muslims to regard the previous year's treaty as abrogated and so it was that the inhabitants of Mecca awoke one morning in January 630 to find a huge army with Muhammad at its head immediately outside the city. One of Muhammad's most persistent critics, an uncle by the name of Abbas (after whom a dynasty was later named), negotiated the handing over of the city to avert bloodshed. Muhammad had compiled a list of approximately twenty persons who were to be put to death when the city was his. He spared most of them when they begged forgiveness but forbearance was not shown to those who had lampooned him.

Muhammad's eyes were on the Ka'aba where he had first preached. Here as a young man he had been given the honour of settling a dispute between the clans over

who should have the right to carry the celebrated Black Stone back to the wall to be reinserted after renovations. Now, after forty years, he had the supreme satisfaction of purging the Ka'aba of its idols, whitewashing the interior and sealing it closed, dedicated thenceforth exclusively to Allah. There exists a tradition that there was an icon of the Virgin and Child within the Ka'aba that Muhammad ordered not to be effaced. The majority of those among the inhabitants of Mecca who had misgivings about Muhammad's advent into the city submitted to the rule of Islam. The pagans who did not find it expedient to convert immediately were given a four-month period of grace in which to do so or face death (*Qur'an* 9:1-5).

Within two months of securing victory in Mecca, Muhammad, now aged about 60, was at Tabouk on the borders of the Byzantine domains, posing a threat northwards towards Jerusalem and towards Aqaba on the Red Sea. At Tabouk an agreement was worked out between the Muslims and their first subjects that was to have far-reaching consequences. The inhabitants of Aqaba, led by Yohanna ibn Ruba, offered Muhammad money if they would desist from attacking the town. In this way was born the one guinea per person poll tax (*jizyah*) by which many peoples facing the Muslim advance over the following one hundred years could obtain a continuation of their traditional way of life. Muhammad particularly approved of the payment of this tax because it symbolised

an appropriate degree of humiliation for the Jews and Christians who came under his sway (*Qur'an* 9:29).

After the pilgrimage in 632 Muhammad, Umar and others planned another *razzia* against Syria. Muhammad appointed the youthful Osama, son of Zaid ibn Haritha, one of his first converts, to lead the expedition so that he might avenge the death of his father at Mu'ta three years earlier. This is the last executive act that Muhammad is known to have carried out. When he departed this life in June 632 he was the undisputed master of Arabia.

ISLAMIC BELIEF

The One-ness of Allah

One of the attractions of Islam is its simplicity. To become a Muslim it is necessary only to make a simple declaration of acceptance of the one-ness (*tawhid*) of Allah (literally *the* God) together with the proposition that Muhammad was his Final Messenger (*rasoul*), as well as to undertake to perform the duties associated with the Five Pillars of Islam described below. There are, however, a number of implications in this. For instance the ‘message’ delivered by Muhammad is not the Gospel proclamation of the forgiveness of sins but the *Qur’an* itself as the pre-existent Words of God delivered by the angel Gabriel. Muhammad in effect is seen simply as the conduit by which this message was delivered. This difference of perception in how God reveals himself to mankind, together with the refusal on the part of Muslims to accept the Bible as inspired, renders Christian-Muslim dialogue more problematical than that with Judaism.

While Jews regard their own tradition as ultimately being responsible for raising Ethical Monotheism, in all its forms, to what it is today, and Christians regard theirs as being the first to have a universal appeal, Muslims tend to see themselves as guardians of a truth that was

obscured by false doctrine. They detect a natural tendency on the part of mankind to associate another being or beings with the Almighty. Not only Christians but also Jews and the esoteric sects within Islam are all viewed as having been tainted with this ‘associationism’ (*shirk*). Frequently this concept is rendered in English as ‘polytheism’, but this is to miss the point:

“The unique usage of Allah as a personal name of God is a reflection of Islam’s emphasis on the purity of the belief in God which is the essence of the message of all God’s messengers. Because of this Islam considers associating any deity or personality with God as a deadly sin which God will never forgive despite the fact that He may forgive all other sins.” (*The Concept of God in Islam*, Naseem, Riyadh).

As related below, even Muhammad himself came close to permitting the ‘daughters of Allah’ to act as intercessors. It is of course possible for anyone holding the Catholic faith to explain the paradox of ‘Three in One and One in Three’ in a way that is comprehensible to a Unitarian or a Muslim. However, it would be difficult to convince him or her that the ‘unicity’ of the Godhead was not thereby compromised. Similarly, for such Unitarians the doctrine of the Incarnation of the Divine Word appears to compromise the utter transcendence of God, whose holiness (i.e. ‘other-ness’) is believed to preclude crossing the threshold into our suffering, sinful and corruptible

human world. All attempts to explain why the doctrine of the Trinity does not in fact amount to 'tritheism' are ultimately likely to founder on this perception.

Sunni and Shi'ite

Ninety percent of Muslims today base their religious beliefs exclusively on the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* (Traditions) of Muhammad. The name by which they are known, Sunni, comes from the word *sunnah* meaning 'path'. Following the essentially political controversy concerning the accession of Muhammad's cousin Ali, and later Ali's sons Hasan and Husain, to the Caliphate, the schism between the majority Umayyads and the partisans of Ali, gradually took on a doctrinal character. At the festival of Ashura, in which Shi'ites mortify themselves in memory of Husain, believers hope to receive remission of sins by freely confessing their sense of inherited responsibility for the failure to assist Husain on the field of battle. Shi'ites also believe that Ali and all his descendants are Imams or 'leaders of the people'. The Twelfth Imam is believed to be in a state of Absence (*ghaiba*) from the world, having disappeared in mysterious circumstances in the ninth century. In time he will return as the Divinely Guided One, the *Mahdi*, to purge Islam of alleged Sunni distortions and make known to all Muslims the esoteric meaning of the *Qur'an* which can only be mediated through the succession of Imams.

Such beliefs, which come perilously close to saying that Muhammad was not the final 'seal' (*khatm*) of the prophets, are severely disapproved of by most Muslims outside Iran and southern Iraq. Historians explain the large concentration of Shi'ites in this area by referring to the sacral nature of kingship which needed a new focal point when the Persian Empire was violently overthrown soon after the death of Muhammad and the last Sassanian Shah, Yazdegerd III, was assassinated.

Among the small esoteric groups (*batini*) found predominantly in Syria and Lebanon, the Ismailis were once feared on account of their revolutionary social tendency. Led by the Aga Khan today, they believe in the legitimacy of only the first Seven Imams. In addition they believe that there have been seven cosmic ages corresponding to seven enlighteners of mankind - Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and the Ismaili 'Master of the Age', each with his assistant such as Aaron, Peter or Ali. The full exposition of their doctrine, the *Ta'lim*, is communicated to only a tiny number of initiates. Two related groups - the Alawites, so-called because they believe Ali to have been the most perfect follower of Muhammad, and the Druze - have developed philosophies which admit the possibility of reincarnation and the transmigration of souls.

The *Qur'an*

During Muhammad's lifetime some of the *Qur'anic* texts were written down on whatever came to hand, while others were memorised by his followers. The credit for overseeing the compilation of the *Qur'an* very much in its present form belongs to the third Caliph, Uthman (r. 644-56). The literary quality of the classical Arabic in which the *Qur'an* was given is much higher than anything else composed in that tongue:

“And if you are in doubt concerning that which We have sent down to our servant, then produce a *surah* the like thereof and call your witnesses besides Allah if you are truthful.” (Qur'an 2:23)

For many Muslims this is sufficient proof of its divine origin. As we have seen, for the Muslim it is God, not Muhammad, who is the speaker throughout the *Qur'an*. Classical Arabic stands in relation to the different dialects of modern Arabic much as Latin does to Italian and the Iberian languages. However, in contrast to the experience of Northern European states at the time of the Protestant Reformation, in Muslim countries there has never been popular agitation for translations of the sacred texts into an easily understood vernacular. Many schools hold contests for who can learn and recite the most by heart in the original.

Christians generally understand by the 'word of God' not the actual words themselves but the message of

salvation contained within Scripture. In other words they look to the underlying rationale (in Greek *logos*). This accounts for why they tolerate slight variations within the ancient manuscripts with complete equanimity. Disputes within Christendom have, historically, arisen only over tendentious translations. If, as no-one denies, many sections of the Bible, in both the Old and the New Testaments, were once part of an oral tradition, their preservation from any material error was guaranteed by the operation of the Holy Spirit. Muslim concern about even the slightest possible differences in copies of the *Qur'an* appeared as early as Uthman's caliphate when vigorous attempts were made to locate and destroy variant manuscripts.

The Hadith

During his lifetime Muhammad gave his own interpretation of how Muslims should lead their lives. The subjects covered include the bringing up of children, ethical hunting practices and behaviour towards one's neighbour. Regarding the latter for example, Muhammad directed his followers never to talk about each other behind their backs, whether for good or ill, a habit referred to as 'back biting'. Such 'Traditions' (*Hadith*, pronounced 'hadeeth') have less force than the *surahs* of the *Qur'an* but they are regarded as an authentic 'gloss' on the latter and consequently are binding on Muslims. The *Qur'an* and

the *Hadith* together constitute the sole basis of authority in religious matters for the world's Sunni Muslims.

Prophets and Prophecy

Many Biblical concepts including 'Messiah' (*al-masih*), 'the Word of God' and the 'Holy Spirit' are to be found in the *Qur'an* but it is not always clearly recognised by Christian writers that each is given a different meaning from that which it bears in the Biblical context. Even the word 'prophet' (in both Hebrew and Arabic *Nabi*) does not have a self-evident meaning. Muslim apologists often try to support their claim that Islam dates from much earlier than the seventh century by reference to Adam who, they claim, was the very first prophet. The Biblical prophets were those inspired few who were able to discern the hand of God in contemporary history for the benefit of the community of believers. Consequently Adam can only be construed as a prophet by radically altering the meaning of the word. Many Christians tend to think of prophets as essentially Old Testament figures alternately uttering dire warnings and promising a Messianic age of peace, overlooking the fact that the gift of prophecy is one of the Gifts of the Spirit listed by St Paul (*I Co* 12:10).

More vital even than the precise meaning of such key terms is the question of suffering. For Muhammad it was axiomatic that all prophets sent as admonishers are

ultimately vindicated before their contemporaries. In the Old Testament it was Jeremiah who suffered most for bearing witness to divine truth and his 'passion' to some degree prefigures that of Christ. It is not without significance that the *Qur'an* contains not a single reference to this most major of the major prophets.

'A' Prophet or 'The' Prophet ?

In Deuteronomy (*Dt* 18:19) God says to Moses that he will raise up for the people a prophet of comparable stature and authority and anyone who refuses to listen will be liable to the appropriate penalty. This prophetic figure is specifically referred to in the New Testament where we read that St John the Baptist was asked, "Why are you baptising if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" (*Jn* 1:25)

Throughout his trial, just as he was questioned explicitly about his teaching, Jesus himself confronted the Chief Priests and the members of the Sanhedrin with an implied question which he had once put to a small circle of his disciples: "Who do men say that I am?" It was, and still is, a critical question. For Christians the question of there being 'another prophet', after the High Priest and Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, had given their respective answers to Jesus' question, simply does not arise.

Muhammad seems to have identified the prophet spoken of to Moses with himself, something that partially

explains the severity of his reaction to rejection by the Jews of Medina. For Christians, Jesus is at once *Prophet* (in the sense previously explained), *Priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek* by whom Abraham was blessed in the wilderness (*Gn* 14:17-20 and *Ps* 110:4), and *King* or ‘Anointed One’ (*Messiah* in Hebrew; *Christos* in Greek). The role of the Messiah in early Late Judaism was that of “restorer of the kingdom to Israel”, the term ‘kingdom’ being understood as referring primarily to sovereignty, not a geographical entity. The *Qur’anic* understanding is of two entirely separate spheres or zones, the kingdoms of heaven and earth (*Qur’an* 48:14). By contrast Jesus could declare to Pontius Pilate that his kingdom was not ‘of this world’ and that if it were of this world his followers would have been fighting to prevent him from being handed over. (*Jn* 18:36)

Son of God

A less familiar term than either *Messiah* or *Christos* but nevertheless employed not only for the Hebrew kings of the Old Testament but for Jesus in the New, is the Greek term *paidion* which originally signified both ‘servant’ and ‘child’ in the sense of ‘adopted son’. Accordingly the designation ‘Son of God’ was principally a royal title in ancient Hebrew thought, King David being the archetype of a monarch whose delight is in serving God. A more generic term ‘son of

God' seems to have had wider currency (if less precise meaning) however, for the centurion who witnessed Jesus's death on the cross said, "Truly this man was a son of God." (cf. Ezra as God's son in *Qur'an* 9:30). Whether or not in Jewish thought of the inter-testamental period the expected Messiah was to be a warrior figure or a pre-existent one was still an open question. There is one passage in the first three gospels in which Jesus asks the Pharisees:

"What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David, by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord', saying, 'The Lord said unto my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I put all your enemies under your feet.' (*Ps* 110:1) If David thus calls him 'Lord', how can he be his son?" (*Mt* 22:42-45)

It is instructive to read a typical Muslim commentary on this passage:

"If the first Lord (the speaker) is God, the one spoken to could not be God also, as David knew only one God. So it should read: 'God said to my Lord ...' Who was that whom David called 'my Lord'? The Church would say Jesus. But this had been denied by Jesus himself in *Matthew* 22:45. He excluded himself from this title as he was son of David. Jesus must have given an answer not recorded in the four canonical gospels, but mentioned explicitly in the Gospel of Barnabas, that the promise was made in Ishmael,

not in Isaac. David's Lord was thus Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) whom he saw in spirit. No prophet ever accomplished more than Muhammad (PBUH). Even the work of all other prophets put together is still small compared with what Muhammad (PBUH) did within a short period of 23 years and which remains unchanged until now." (H.M. Baagil, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue* 1991. Riyadh).

The so-called Gospel of Barnabas, in which our Lord is described going to Nazareth by boat, is considered a mediaeval forgery by mainstream scholarly opinion. In the *Qur'an* Jesus is portrayed very much as Christians see St John the Baptist:

Jesus, son of Mary said: "Children of Israel, I am indeed the messenger of God to you confirming the Torah that is before me and giving good tidings of a messenger who shall come after me whose name shall be 'Ahmad'." (*Qur'an* 61:6)

'Ahmad' ('the praised one') is derived from the same root as the name 'Muhammad'.

Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit in the *Qur'an* is identified with Gabriel who announces to Mary the virginal conception of a "boy most pure".

"We sent unto her Our Spirit that presented himself to her a man without fault." (19:17)

This conception of God's Spirit seems to have generated no little controversy in Muhammad's own lifetime for we read (17:85):

"They will question you concerning the Spirit. Say:

'The Spirit of the bidding of my Lord. You have been given of knowledge nothing except a little'."

The references to the coming of the Holy Spirit as the 'Comforter' (or 'Counsellor'; in Greek *parakletos*) in the Gospel according to St John (*Jn* 14:15-29; 16:6-15) are often described by Muslim commentators as interpolations by Christian writers. Others adopt an ingenious line of argument. They suppose firstly that the actual Aramaic term spoken by Jesus (whatever that was) should have been rendered *periklytos* meaning 'admirable' or 'glorified'. This they equate with 'praised' and hence with the name 'Muhammad' in Arabic. The coming of the *Paraclete* is, accordingly, deemed the coming of a prophet. His abiding forever "shows that there would be no need for additional prophets to succeed him."

Regarding the role of the Spirit in leading mankind into truth we read, "So truthful and trustworthy would he be that he could be called 'Al-Amin'", or as the Greek text of John 16:13 says, "the Spirit of Truth", one of whom it could be said "He has brought them the

Truth”. (*Qur’an* 23:70) Muslim commentators are invariably silent about vv.14-15, which contain the words: “All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he [the Spirit] will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

Trinity and Tritheism

For Christians the Holy Spirit is the Third Person (i.e. ‘Personality’ in the sense of ‘aspect’) of an indivisible Trinity, or ‘Triunity’ as it might less misleadingly have been termed by the Early Church Fathers. In order to explain the relationship between Jesus and God the Father, St Athanasius and other early Church Fathers employed an analogy between light and the sun. The former proceeds from the latter, and shares its essence. It cannot exist on its own but is independently subsistent. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is prefigured in the Old Testament in the account of the Lord appearing to Abraham by the Oaks of Mamre (*Gn* 18). Trinitarian Christians, it should hardly need saying, do not believe that ‘God is the Third of Three’ (*Qur’an* 5:73).

From his childhood visits to Syria, Muhammad could remember the *worship* offered by Christians to God the Father and to the eternally begotten Son Jesus Christ, and the *veneration* of the Blessed Virgin. Muhammad’s abhorrence of what he considered to be the Christians’

belief that the fatherhood of God is to be understood in a biological sense can be seen in *Qur'an* 37:151-2:

“Is it not of their own calumny that they say, ‘God has begotten’? They are truly liars.”

The way in which Biblical language and concepts all too often bear a different meaning in the *Qur'an* can be seen in the following:

‘The Messiah Jesus, son of Mary, was only the Messenger of God, and his Word that he committed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him.’ (*Qur'an* 4:171)

Formerly the Arabs believed that Allah had three daughters - Lat, Uzza and Manat (who are mentioned in *Qur'an* 53:19-20). On one occasion during one of the few attempts at finding a way for Muslims and non-Muslims in Mecca to effect a compromise by which they could co-exist, Muhammad astonished his assistants by stating that it had been revealed to him that these three goddesses might be acceptable as intercessors. However, this verse was quickly abrogated on the grounds that it must have been inspired by Satan. No degree of ‘associationism’ was tolerated again and Muslims have emphasised the *Tawhid* of Allah ever since.

Redemption

Regarding the death of Jesus the *Qur'an* is no less specific:

‘[T]hey did not slay him, neither crucified him, only a likeness of that was shown to them ... and they slew him

not for a certainty - no, indeed; God raised him up to Him...' (*Qur'an* 4:157)

There were at that time a variety of beliefs about the redemptive work of Jesus in circulation in the Near East. Some proposed that Simon of Cyrene or Judas was crucified as a substitute; others that all aspects of the life of Jesus, including his suffering, were more apparent than real - a heterodox belief known as 'docetism' (from the Greek *dokein* 'to seem'). Today, in those Islamic countries where Christians are only to be found among migrant workers, both displaying the Cross on buildings, and the visible wearing of it on one's person, are contrary to law.

Whereas for Muhammad crucifixion would have been proof positive of a failure by God to vindicate his servant, for St Paul it was a triumph (*Col* 2:13-15), not only because it looses mankind from the bondage to sin and death (*Rm* 7:21-25) but because it frees him from the 'Curse of the Law' (*Ga* 3:10-14). In the words of the North American evangelical writer, Phillip W. Keller:

"The Cross represents the judgement of divine justice upon sin and selfishness. It stands for the wide forgiveness of God's love and mercy extended to us in our pollution, declaring the depths to which Christ descended to restore, redeem and make us whole as His own people. This He achieved by laying down His life for us - pouring Himself out that we might be preserved and not perish in our defilement."

As we know, the Gospel ('Good News') that the Apostles proclaimed was the Redemption of mankind. In every day usage the term 'redemption' meant paying the price necessary in order to purchase the freedom of a slave from his or her owner. For Muhammad the Gospel (*Injil* from the Greek *Evangelion*) was no more than wisdom teaching from another in a long line of 'messengers' sent from God. However, for Christians to 'confirm' the Gospel (*Qur'an* 3:3) is to recognise the redemptive work of Jesus's suffering and death and the triumphant vindication brought about by resurrection. We can tell from the numerous instances on which Muhammad restored slaves to liberty that he would have been psychologically receptive to such an understanding of the Gospel if it had been made clear to him.

Eschatology

A number of traditions in the *Hadith* refer to the role appointed for Jesus (*Eisa*) in Islamic thought about the Close of the Age. Having been lifted up to heaven in order to evade the pain of crucifixion, Jesus will, at the appointed hour, descend to the white minaret east of Damascus as a 'just ruler'. He will search for the Muslim 'Antichrist' (*Dajjal*) whom he will kill with his own hand at Lod (i.e. Lydda, Tel-Aviv), which is, it so happens, the traditional site of the martyrdom of St George. Thereafter

Jews and Christians, the ‘people of the Book’ (*ahl al-Kitab*), will recognise Islam thereby putting an end to mutual animosity:

“He it is who sent His Messenger with guidance in religion in order that he may cause it to prevail over all religion.” (*Qur’an* 9:33)

Jesus will then symbolically break the Cross thereby showing the beliefs of the Christians to be a perversion before living on for another 45 years. During this time he will marry and have children (the exact numbers of wives and offspring are not stated) and on his death be buried with Muhammad.

“Then I [Muhammad] and Eisa bin Maryam will stand up in one grave between Abu Bakr and Umar.”

There are many points of similarity between the *Qur’anic* descriptions of the Day of Judgement (set to last 50,000 years) and those in the New Testament. Likewise, as in the New Testament, “the Hour” will come very suddenly. The descriptions of Paradise are most distinctive - gardens, green pastures, gushing fountains, abundant fruit trees and palms, “maidens (*houris*) good and comely, cloistered in cool pavilions untouched before by any man or *jinn*, reclining on green cushions and lovely druggets” - are all typical images.

Descriptions of Hell in the *Qur’an* and *Hadith* are also extraordinarily graphic and had a profound effect on Muhammad’s listeners:

“...beyond him Gehenna, and he is given to drink oozing pus, the which he gulps, and can scarce swallow, and death comes upon him from every side, yet he cannot die; and still beyond him is a harsh chastisement.” (*Qur’an* 14:16)

The following traditon regarding non-Muslims has been preserved among Muhammad’s *Hadith*: “[B]y him in whose hand is the life of Muhammad, any Jew or *Nasrani* (i.e. Christian) who hears about me and dies before affirming his belief in that which I have been sent, he shall be but one of the companions of the Fire.”

An entire *surah* - number 56 - is entitled ‘The Terror’. The combined total of references in the *Qur’an* to the terrors of Judgment and Hell outnumber those to Paradise by a ratio of approximately five to one.

Original Sin

The account of Adam and his (unnamed) wife in the Garden of Eden (*Qur’an* 7:19f) closely follows that in Genesis chapter 3 until the point where God confronts the couple with their disobedience. In this version of events Adam is forgiven but then told to leave the Garden of Eden with his wife “each of you an enemy to each”. According to Muslim tradition outside the *Qur’an*, Adam and Eve (*Hewa*) had earlier fallen from Paradise itself. The angels are understood to have been jealous of Adam because they lost a competition to see who was more

End of booklet sample. Find more and order online:

<http://www.ignatius-cts.com/>