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Christian responses to Islam, Islamism and 'Islamic terrorism'

by Colin Chapman

Summary

Why is it that some Muslims become Islamists and some Islamists turn to violence? A summary of some basic convictions held in varying degrees by *all* Muslims is followed by an explanation of how Islamists have developed these ideas in response to various challenges (especially political) of the modern world. This analysis brings us face to face with what has been called 'the struggle for the soul of Islam'.[1] It is only against this background that we are in a position to suggest how Christians can respond at many different levels to Muslims in general and to Islamists in particular.

Introduction

One of the reasons why we have such difficulty in responding to issues related to Islam is that we find it hard to distinguish between 'Islam' (the whole system of beliefs and the way of life of 1.3 billion Muslims), 'Islamism' (Islamic Fundamentalism – sometimes called Revivalist, Radical, Activist or Political Islam), and 'Islamic terrorism' (terrorism carried out by Muslims in the name of Islam). As a result of the failure to make these distinctions, many suggest, for example, that terrorism carried out by Muslims is a natural expression of Islamic beliefs.[2]

If we are to avoid giving false testimony against our neighbour (Exodus 20:16), it is essential that Christians should allow Muslims to define themselves and therefore recognise that most Muslims would want to distinguish between 'Muslims', 'Islamists' and 'Muslim/Islamist terrorists'. While the parallel is not exact, one could say that a Muslim studying terrorism in Northern Ireland in recent years would similarly have needed to distinguish between Christianity, the Roman Catholic Church and the IRA.

Ishtiaq Ahmed, a Muslim leader in Bradford, estimated in 2001 that around 15 per cent of British Muslims could be called 'Islamist' or 'Radical', 15 per cent Liberal or Modernist, while the remaining 70 per cent could be described as Traditionalist or Orthodox.[3] Although some recent polls have given a higher proportion for Islamists, it is clear that they are still a minority, and that those among them who approve of violence in the name of Islam would therefore be a minority within a minority. Many Muslims dissociate themselves completely from the militants and terrorists. There are significant numbers of British Muslims, however, who would not actively support the use of violence, but would not openly condemn it. And many would argue that if violence cannot be justified in the British context, it *can* be justified in certain other contexts like Afghanistan, Iraq or Israel/Palestine. Neat categories with clear labels do not fit this debate, and even among Islamists there is a wide spectrum of approaches from moderates (in sympathy, for example, with the Muslim Council of Britain and the Muslim Association of Britain) to extremists (like Hizb ut-Tahrir, Supporters of Sharee'ah and the Saved Sect).[4]

Basic convictions held by all Muslims

The concept of the *umma* (the Islamic nation or people who accept the core beliefs

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1 John Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*, Oxford University Press, 2003, p.28.
2 Note the title of Patrick Sookhdeo's *Understanding Islamic Terrorism: The Islamic Doctrine of War*, Isaac Publishing, 2004.
3 Quoted in Peter G. Riddell, *Christians and Muslims: Pressures and Potential in a Post 9/11 World*, IVP, 2004, p.18.
4 See Anthony McRoy, *From Rushdie to 7/7: The Radicalisation of Islam in Britain*, The Social Affairs Unit, 2006.

of Islam) creates a strong sense of solidarity among Muslims worldwide, so that they generally feel that an attack on one group of Muslims is an attack on the whole House of Islam.

Muslims look back with pride to a number of 'Golden Ages' in the past: the first Islamic state created in Medina, the period of the four Rightly-Guided Caliphs (the successors of Muhammad as leaders of the Muslim community), the Abbassid Dynasty based in Baghdad, and Islamic rule in Spain. They are painfully aware of the decline of the Muslim world in relation to Europe that began around the sixteenth century, and are very conscious of the weakness and humiliation of the Muslim world today. They therefore have a distinctive way of understanding their own history, which sees the weak state of the Muslim world as a result of the decline in the practice of real Islam.

Their thinking about politics is guided by a number of basic concepts which are closely related. Since God has given his law (*shari'a*) to show how individuals and communities should order their lives, the ideal situation for every Muslim to live in is an Islamic state, where there should be no separation between religion and state. For many centuries the areas of the world in which Islam ruled were called *Dar al-Islam* (The House of Islam) and the rest of the world *Dar al-harb* (The House of War, i.e. areas which, it was hoped, would eventually come under the rule of Islam). These terms, however, are now being modified by many Muslims who want to speak of *Dar al-dawa* (The House of Mission), *Dar al-shahada* (House of Testimony) or *Dar al-sulh* (House of Peace) instead of The House of War.[5] These ideas together have generally led to a strong sense of the importance of political power and territoriality: 'Islam must rule',[6] and Muslims will always want to hold onto any territory they rule. They also make it harder for some Muslims to come to terms with the fact that around one in four Muslims are now living as minority communities in pluralist societies in different parts of the world.

It is in this context that we need to understand *jihad*, which is usually (but misleadingly) translated 'Holy War'. The word means 'struggle' and is used to describe the struggle in which all Muslims should be engaged 'in the path of God'. Over the centuries it has become, in the words of John Esposito, 'a defining concept or belief in Islam…a universal religious obligation for all true Muslims to join the *jihad* to promote a global Islamic revolution.'[7] Some Muslims regard it as the sixth 'Pillar of Islam', and therefore an obligation for all Muslims. Although in recent years many liberal Muslims in the West have focused on the more spiritual meanings of *jihad*, Bernard Lewis is justified in pointing out that 'For most of the fourteen centuries of recorded Muslim history, *jihad* was most commonly interpreted to mean armed struggle for the defence or advancement of Muslim power.'[8] The emphasis on spiritual *jihad* is therefore a comparatively recent phenomenon.

Warfare and violence are justified in self-defence. Muslims generally, therefore, have no hesitation in saying that they have had a right to defend themselves against all that the West has been doing to the world of Islam in recent centuries. During his time in Medina the Prophet Muhammad believed that he received revelations from God permitting him to fight in order to protect the new Islamic community from the pagans of Mecca who sought to defeat him (e.g. 'You are enjoined to fight, though it is something you dislike…' Q 2:216-217). It should also be noted that Islamic law lays down clear guidelines for the conduct of war, and that there are some similarities between traditional Islamic teaching about *jihad* and the Christian concept of the Just War.

Muslims can never forget the fact that at various times between the mid-eighteenth century and the mid-twentieth century, the majority of the Muslim world came under direct Western colonial rule, and even in those areas that were not colonised, Western powers were actively interfering in their attempts to extend their influence. This is particularly difficult for Muslims to accept since for centuries they had been ruling in the Middle East over populations which at first were largely Christian. It is appropriate in their minds, therefore, for Muslims to be ruling over Christians, but hard to understand how God could have allowed Christians to rule over Muslims. The creation of Israel in 1948 is seen as the last and most provocative example of Western colonialism, since whereas the older empires have passed away, this colonial entity remains as a major thorn in the flesh at the heart of the Muslim world.

While suicide is totally forbidden in Islamic law, martyrs (*shuhada'*) who give their lives for the cause of God in the context of *jihad* are highly honoured, and are assured of instant entrance to Paradise.

While it is often difficult to distinguish between 'religion' and 'culture', it seems that the concept of 'honour' (*izza* in Arabic, *izzat* in Urdu) is fundamental in most Muslim cultures (especially in the Middle East and South Asia), and means that every individual has an obligation to defend the honour of the family and the community. This is what lies behind the so-called 'honour killings' which have been reported both in the UK and in Islamic countries in recent years. Tariq Modood defines it as 'a form of honour important to Muslims, usually associated with the social standing or respectability a family may enjoy'. Related to *izzat* is the concept of *ghaira* (Arabic, meaning zeal, jealousy, fervour, sense of honour or self-respect; Urdu *ghairat*), which means upholding the honour of Islam. Modood says that *ghairat* 'is about the quality of one's pride or love – pride in one's religion – or the Prophet'.[9]

Jews and Christians are given special respect in the Qur'an as 'People of the Book', and are therefore in a different category from pagan idolaters. The Prophet Muhammad, however, had a difficult relationship with the three main Jewish tribes in Medina, largely because they refused to accept his prophetic claims and were accused of colluding with the idolaters of Mecca against him. Several Qur'anic verses are highly critical of Jews and seem to reflect these difficult relationships. For example: 'You shall find the most hostile to the believers to be the Jews and the polytheists…' (Q 5:82). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that when Muslims experience difficulties at the hands of Jews – as they have done in Israel/Palestine – they easily make a connection between their own experience and that of the Prophet. Some of the sayings of Muhammad recorded in *hadith* express sentiments about the Jews which by today's standards could be described as anti-Semitic.

It is difficult to point to one consistent attitude towards Christians in the Qur'an since it contains a wide spectrum. Some verses are very positive (e.g. 2:62), and the verse already quoted which speaks of the Jews' hostility continues: '…and you will find the closest in affection to the believers those who say: "We are Christians." …' (5:82–83). Other verses are more critical and argumentative (e.g. 3:64; 3:84; 4:171; 29:46; 5:51; 5:72–73). The most hostile verse instructs Muslims: 'Fight against those who do not believe in God nor in the last Day and who do not hold forbidden what God has prohibited and who do not adhere

5   See for example, Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp.72–74.
6   Kenneth Cragg, *Islam and the Muslim*, The Open University Press, 1978, p.79.
7   Esposito, *Unholy War*, p.27.
8   Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*, Phoenix, 2004, p.27.

9   Quoted in McRoy, *From Rushdie to 7/7*, p.234.

to the religion of truth, being among those to whom the Book was given. Do so until they pay the *Jizyah* [tax on tolerated communities] personally, once they have been reduced to submission.' (9:29). Since there is such a wide range of attitudes expressed towards Christians in the Qur'an, Muslims have to work out principles of interpretation to show which of these verses are most relevant in their relationships with Christians today.

The Qur'an is regarded as the very words of God communicated to Muhammad, but needs to be interpreted by Muslims in their different contexts today. This is particularly important in dealing with verses about violence. The command 'fight' (*qatilu*) is found nine times in the Qur'an (e.g. 2:190), and the command 'kill' (*uqtulu*) is found five times (e.g. 2:191). There are two principles used by Muslims to enable them to interpret verses of this kind.

- The first principle is that every verse has to be understood in the light of the context in which it was revealed to Muhammad. Commands to fight enemies cannot therefore be turned into a general rule for all time, since the command was appropriate for the particular historical situation and may not be relevant to Muslims today.

- The second principle is known as Abrogation, and means that in a certain number of cases (the exact number is disputed) a later revelation abrogates or cancels out a previous one. When this principle is applied, earlier verses which express positive attitudes towards Christians are abrogated by the verse revealed in the last year of the Prophet's life calling Muslims to fight a particular group of Christians until they submit (9:29). It is the later revelation which provides an authoritative ruling for Muslims today.

Convictions which turn a Muslim into an Islamist

The question now becomes: what are the further beliefs which lead ordinary Muslims to cross the line and become politically motivated Islamists? What were some of the ideas developed by Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1791), the founder of Wahhabism in Arabia,[10] and later by the great Islamist ideologues, Hasan al-Banna in Egypt (1906–1949), Abul A'la Mawdudi in Pakistan (1903–1979) and Sayyid Qutb in Egypt (1906–1966), in response to the social and political developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?[11] While it is hard to generalise, these are some of the basic convictions held in varying degrees by those who could be called Islamists. Some try very deliberately to contextualise these ideas in the British, European or Western context.

Islamists have decided that they must do *something* to change the terrible situation they are in. Jason Burke sums this up as 'a feeling that something is wrong that needs to be set right. This can be a real problem or merely a perceived injustice (or indeed both).'[12] Their activism is usually expressed in legitimate ways through political activism and the media. When they are accused of using illegitimate means to achieve their goals, they argue that the end sometimes justifies the means.

Sayyid Qutb developed the idea that *jahiliyya* ('the Age of Ignorance'), used traditionally to describe the state of Arab society prior to Islam, should be applied to the contemporary Muslim world because of its abandonment of real Islam. It is important to recognise that Islamists are generally just as angry – and sometime even angrier – with fellow-Muslims than they are

with the non-Muslim West.

Ibn Taymiya in the fourteenth century issued a highly significant *fatwa* (legal ruling) which called on Muslims to use violence to overthrow their own rulers who were not faithful to Islam. These ideas have been taken up by Islamists today who use the word *takfir* (to pronounce someone a *kafir* [unbeliever] and therefore to excommunicate) and apply it to unfaithful Muslims in general and to corrupt and autocratic Muslim governments which collude with the West in particular.

Islamists see Islam as a complete religio-political system. Since Islam has always been seen as a complete way of life, Islam should be self-sufficient, relying on resources within its own tradition to renew itself. While Muslims can benefit from advances in science, technology and medicine, they do not need any of the ideologies developed in the West and do not need to incorporate elements of Western law into traditional Islamic law. Thus while some aspects of modernity can be embraced, whatever is inconsistent with Islam must be firmly rejected.

Many Islamists have adopted the word *khalifa* (caliphate) to sum up their goal of uniting the whole of the Muslim world in adherence to Islamic law and under a central leadership. They see Ataturk's policy of enforced secularisation, which included the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924, as a disaster for the cause of Islam, and want to see something like the Caliphate restored today.

Islamists tend to be critical of traditionalist, orthodox Muslims for not engaging with the real problems today. They are extremely critical of the many forms of folk Islam, and condemn Liberal/Modernist Muslims for adapting too much to the modern world.

Most Islamists not only condemn the actions of the state of Israel since its creation in 1948, but question its right to exist as a Jewish state. While the recent rhetoric of the Iranian President suggests that his goal is to bring about another Holocaust and drive all Israeli Jews into the sea, what he and other Islamists are probably calling for is the abolition of Israel as a Jewish state and the creation of *either* a more secular state in which Jews and Muslims are equals *or* an Islamic state in which Jews, if they want to live there, would live under Islamic rule.[13]

They often have extremely negative views of Christians, calling them *kuffar*, unbelievers, and some expressions of anti-Semitism are as strong and pernicious as any that have been seen in Western contexts.[14]

What Islamists have been doing is to draw on certain ideas that are there in their scriptures, their tradition and their history in order to face modern situations and challenges. If they feel that the Muslim world has been under attack, it is hardly surprising that many of them feel that the commands about engaging in *jihad* that were addressed to the first Muslims in the Qur'an are addressed also to them in their contexts today.

Convictions which encourage Islamists towards violence

Why is it that some Islamists believe that violence in the name of Islam is justified in certain situations, while other Islamists believe that it is never justified? What were some of the beliefs that turned Osama bin Laden, a devout orthodox Muslim, into the leader of a network of Muslims dedicated to violence? Here we can note four basic convictions.

Activism channelled into legitimate social and political activities is never going to be enough to achieve the radical changes

10   See Charles Allen, *God's Terrorists: The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad*, Da Capo Press, 2006.
11   See my *'Islamic Terrorism': Is there a Christian Response?*, Grove, 2005, pp.5–11.
12   Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*, Penguin, 2004, 1984. See also Ed Husain, *The Islamist*, Penguin, 2007.
13   See, for example, Ismail al-Faruqi, 'Islam and Zionism' in John L. Esposito, ed., *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, Oxford University Press, 1983, pp.260–267.
14   See, for example, Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion*, Pluto Press, 2002, pp.172–3.

required. Having suggested that the initial urge for the Islamist is 'a feeling that something is wrong that has to be set right', Jason Burke goes on to say that 'The second stage is the feeling that the problem, whether cosmic or purely personal, cannot be solved without recourse to a mode of action or activism beyond those provided by a given society's political or legal framework'.[15] Revolutionary activity which breaks all the accepted bounds, they say, is the only thing that will change the world. *Jihad* must therefore be *both* defensive *and* offensive.

Violence is justified in overthrowing unjust governments. This crucial step was taken by Sayyid Qutb, who spent nine years in prison during Nasser's rule. In this development he went further than Hassan al-Banna, who had founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, and Abul A'la Mawdudi. Qutb's new idea was taken up by Dr. Abdelaziz Azzam, who had a profound influence on Osama bin Laden: '*Jihad* and the rifle alone: no negotiations, no conferences, and no dialogues…*jihad* will remain an individual obligation until all other lands that were Muslim are returned to us so that Islam will reign again: before us lie Palestine, Bokhara, Southern Yemen, Tashkent and Andalusia.'[16]

Suicide in the context of *jihad* is justified – even commendable. This is how Anthony McRoy explains the Islamist distinction between suicide and martyrdom in the thinking of Islamists: 'Suicide is a sin in Islam, but the definition of suicide concerns one's intention (*niyya*). If self-destruction is motivated by despair of one's life, that is suicide, and thus is sinful. If it is to please God by fighting the enemies of Islam, necessitating self-sacrifice in the process, that is not suicide, but martyrdom. The main issue concerns the objects of the action.'[17]

The West in general and the US in particular are seen as 'the Great Enemy' which is making war on the Muslim world. Thus, in the words of John Esposito, 'In 1998 bin Laden announced the formation of the World Islamic Front for the Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders, an umbrella group of radical movements across the Muslim world, and issued a *fatwa* stating that it is the duty of all Muslims to kill US citizens and their allies.'[18]

At this point we have to recognise a sharp disagreement among Muslims about the acceptability of violence in the cause of Islam. Islamists engaged in terrorism regard the use of violence as a legitimate application of Islamic beliefs and values. Thus the Founding Statement of al-Qa'ida and the Constitution of Hamas contain several Qur'anic verses. Other Muslims, however, argue that violence is totally unacceptable because it goes against Islamic *shari'a* which, for example, forbids violence against civilians. The late Dr Zaki Badawi of the Muslim College in London expressed this strong condemnation of terrorism in a statement in response to 9/11: 'Those who plan and carry out such acts are condemned by Islam, and the massacre of thousands, whoever perpetrated it, is a crime against God as well as humanity.'[19]

Some Muslims would argue that this is the most significant issue which divides the Muslim world. The really obvious gulf is not so much between traditionalist, orthodox Muslims and politically involved Islamists, as between Muslims who practise and approve of violence and those who do not. So, for example, Ziauddin Sardar, a British Muslim, writes: 'We must acknowledge that the terrorists…are products of Islamic history. Only by recognising this brutal fact would we realise that the fight against terrorism is also an internal Muslim struggle within Islam itself.

Indeed, it is a struggle for the very soul of Islam.'[20] Similarly, Meghnad Desai, a Labour peer in the House of Lords and until recently a Professor of Economics at the London School of Economics, argues that Islamists who engage in terrorism need to be seen in the same light as the Bader-Meinhof Gang, the Red Brigade, and extreme ideologies such as Leninisn, Trotskyism and Maoism.[21] Those who take this approach are saying that violence in the name of Islam is a total perversion and betrayal of real Islam.

Christian responses to Islamism and 'Islamic terrorism'

These are some important principles in trying to determine what might be a genuinely Christian response.

Address the theological issues
Christians who have a high view of Scripture cannot fail to notice that Muslims have similar beliefs about the authority of the Qur'an, and that moderate, mainstream Muslims as well as Islamist terrorists base their beliefs on its authority. Christians will therefore want to ask: what does the Qur'an really say on the subject of violence? They are likely to point to Qur'anic verses which call for armed struggle against unbelievers, and argue that while there is something similar in parts of the Old Testament (e.g. in Joshua), there is absolutely nothing comparable to these verses in the teaching of Jesus or in the rest of the New Testament.

But where do we go from here? According to some Christians, recent history simply proves that there is something essentially violent about Islam because, as some would argue, 'there is a virus of violence in the Qur'an. How can you argue against "holy writ", or go against "the greatest examplar" for mankind, Muhammad himself, or disregard that Islam was birthed in violence, was perpetrated in violence, and has a 1400-year history steeped in violence?'

An alternative approach is for Christians to recognise that, while they can make their own judgements about the Qur'an from a Christian perspective, they have no right to tell Muslims how the Qur'an should be interpreted. If Christians don't like Muslims telling them how they should interpret the Bible, they shouldn't try to tell Muslims how to interpret the Qur'an. Christians must therefore recognise that while some Islamist terrorists use Qur'anic verses calling for violence as a theological justification for terrorism, many orthodox Muslims and Islamists totally reject this way of interpreting the Qur'an. There is a convincing logic that lies behind both these ways of interpreting the Qur'an, because both are based on accepted principles of interpretation. Both groups are singing from the same hymn-sheet, but singing very different tunes. Christians therefore need to be cautious about claiming that one approach or the other is the only way of interpreting the Qur'an.

Recognise the importance of the political issues
A number of Christian writers today argue that the problems associated with Islamism and 'Islamic terrorism' are fundamentally problems related to Islamic scripture and theology and therefore play down the significance of political issues as a major reason for the anger of Muslims. These are some recent expressions of this approach:

'In our view it is not the non-Muslim world that stands at the cross-roads, but the Muslim world. Islam has, throughout its history, contained within itself a channel of violence, legitimized by certain passages of the Qur'an, though put in question by other

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15 Burke, *Al-Qaeda*, p.284.
16 Quoted in Esposito, *Unholy War*, p.7.
17 McRoy, *From Rushdie to 7/7*, p.58.
18 Esposito, *Unholy War*, p.21.
19 Zaki Badawi, *Thought for the Day*, BBC Radio 4, 13 September 2001, quoted in Peter G. Riddell and Peter Cotterall, *Islam in Conflict: Past, Present and Future*, IVP, 2003, p.183.
20 Ziauddin Sardar, *Desperately Seeking Paradise*, Grants, 2004.
21 Meghnad Desai, *Rethinking Islamism: The Ideology of the New Terror*, I. B. Tauris, 2007.

passages… Ultimately it is only the Muslim world that can deal with the roots of the problem, which, in our view, do *not* lie in Western materialism or nineteenth-century colonialism or American imperialism, but in Islam's own history, both distant and recent.'[22]

'The primary motivation of terrorists and suicide bombers is theological, compounded mainly of duty and reward… If terrorism is going to be dealt with at its source, Islam has to change and undergo a transformation. In the long term it would appear that the only way to bring an end to Islamic terrorism is to reform the teaching of Islam with regard to war and violence… Without a theology to fuel it, Islamic terrorism would eventually shrivel and die… Unless the militant interpretation of Islamic sources is recognized as the basic cause of Islamic terrorist activities, there is little hope of a lasting solution.'[23]

The other possible approach is to recognise that political issues have been highly significant in the development of Islamism and need to be taken seriously in trying to understand the anger that lies at the heart of the violence in the name of Islam. Wahhabi ideas were taken from Arabia to the Indian subcontinent in the nineteenth century and, having motivated many Muslims in their struggle against the British Raj from then into the twentieth century, have continued to inspire resistance among Muslims to any and every form of imperialism.[24]

Anthony McRoy's detailed account of the development of Islamism in Britain in *From Rushdie to 7/7: the Radicalisation of Islam in Britain* traces the process through a series of crises, beginning with the Rushdie Affair in 1988, then on to the Gulf Crisis of 1990–91, Bosnia (beginning in 1991), then on to 9/11 in 2001 and 7/7 in 2005. He concludes: 'In order to understand the radicalisation of the British Muslim community as a whole, as well as the emergence of specific radical groups within it, we have to understand the impact of several crises upon the community, how they affected the self-identity, assertiveness and organisation of British Muslims, and indeed the *psychological* impact of the crises.'[25] This means that the history of Western imperialism and contemporary issues like the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the occupation of Iraq must be recognised as just as important as the theological issues.

Support moderate Muslims in challenging Islamist interpretations of Islamic sources
Christians will naturally want to point to the differences between Jesus, who was willing to go to the cross, and Muhammad, who took up the sword to protect himself and extend his rule. They will also want to draw attention to the differences between the first three hundred years of Christianity, in which Christians were a powerless and sometimes persecuted minority and the first three hundred years of Islam which witnessed the spread of Islamic rule through conquest over the whole of the Middle East and North Africa.

Muslims, however, are quick to point to many examples in the history of Christianity – like the Crusades and the conquest of Latin America – where the Christian faith has been closely identified with power and where Christians have used the sword not only to defend but also to extend their rule. Drawing attention to the example of Jesus, therefore, needs to be supported by a critical view of Christian history and an honest recognition of the contemporary issues which have fuelled the anger of Muslims.

In this kind of situation Christians should be willing to support those Muslims who challenge the harsher Islamist interpretations of the Qur'an. Instead of suggesting that 'the Qur'an is essentially violent', Christians should listen to the internal debate between moderate and extremist Muslims and add whatever weight they can to support Muslims who challenge the more violent interpretations of the Qur'an, and who do so from *within Islam*.[26]

Find a middle path between demonisation of Islam and naive political correctness
Many Christians feel that if they condemn the naivety of many secular people (and some Christians) who are willing to give in to Muslim demands/requests, the only alternative is to demonise Islam and take a hard line on every public issue related to Islam. A middle way between these two extremes would mean (a) being realistic about the real intentions of *some* Muslims, (b) recognising the diversity among Muslims and relating to them as individuals and groups with openness and honesty, (c) taking a firm stand on issues of human rights, (d) working for the common good of the whole society, (e) demonstrating a fundamental respect for Islam (without agreeing with all its teaching), and (f) unapologetically commending the Christian faith through word and deed.

Recognise the role that Christians can play as peacemakers
One of the major problems in Western democracies is that since the link between religion and state has either been totally severed or become almost meaningless, Western governments find themselves at a loss in dealing with Muslims and Islam. Secular politicians can take strong measures to safeguard the rights of every community and to protect their countries from terrorism carried out in the name of Islam. But they simply don't have the worldview or the language to enable them to engage in a meaningful dialogue with Muslims who want to bring God into the public sphere.

In this situation Western Christians may have a significant role as interpreters, because they ought to be able to understand and sympathise with both sides – with God-fearing Muslims on the one hand (with whom they share many moral values) and secular Westerners on the other (because this is the world in which they have been living). If there is genuine trust between Christians and Muslims, Christians may be able to act as peacemakers and bridge-builders.

Challenge and dissociate ourselves from Christian Zionism
One-sided Western (and especially American) support for Israel is at the top of the list of grievances of all Islamists and most Muslims, and they are frequently baffled and appalled by the unquestioning support that is often given to Israel by Christians. Christian Zionism, therefore, needs to be challenged publicly by Christians who can both point out the negative effects of one-sided support for Israel and present an alternative and more convincing way of interpreting the Bible in relation to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.[27]

Reach out to Muslims out of respect and love rather than out of fear
When Christians hear stories of the persecution of Christians in Islamic countries and are aware of the goals of many Islamists, it

22 Peter G. Riddell and Peter Cotterell, *Islam in Conflict: Past, Present and Future*, IVP, 2003, pp.7–8.
23 Sookhdeo, *Understanding Islamic Terrorism*, pp.143, 214, 217, and 221.
24 See Charles Allen, *God's Terrorists: The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad*.
25 McRoy, *From Rushdie to 7/7*, p.233.
26 See for example, Kenneth Cragg, *The Qur'an and the West*, Melisende, 2005.
27 See my *Whose Promised Land?*, Lion, 2002, and *Whose Holy City? Jerusalem and the Israel–Palestinian Conflict*, Lion, 2004; Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road-Map to Armageddon?*, IVP, 2004, and *Zion's Christian Soldiers? The Bible, Israel and the Church*, IVP, Autumn 2007; Peter Walker, 'Centre Stage: Jerusalem or Jesus?', *Cambridge Papers*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1996.

is understandable that they begin to be afraid of Islam and be suspicious of the intentions of *all* Muslims. As a result they are often paralysed by fear, and want to have as little to do with Muslims as possible. They feel they must 'stand in the gap' publicly against Islam, as some Christian leaders are calling them to do, but have little idea of how to relate to their Muslim neighbours or respond to local and national issues concerning Muslims. Their fear can also inhibit them from sharing their faith with Muslims.

A more healthy approach is to see Muslims not as people to be feared and resisted, but as neighbours to be loved (Matthew 19:19; 22:39). If and when we are able to build relationships of trust, we may have the opportunity to ask the difficult questions. Without a relationship of trust and an attitude of respect from our side ('do this with gentleness and respect', 1 Peter 3:16), Muslims cannot be expected either to listen to the challenges that we want to make or to our witness to Christ.

Christians in Britain need to be reminded that the vast majority of Muslims all over the world are not Islamists, and that Christians living in Islamic countries are not always persecuted and often have surprising freedom to live and share their faith. They also need to know that some of the Muslims in the Middle East who have become disciples of Jesus in recent years have been Islamists. If it was possible for Saul the Pharisee, who persecuted Christians, to turn to Christ, why should we not believe that Islamists can be changed by the message of the gospel?

Be prepared for 'hard talk' with Muslims and Islamists
Christians will of course want to join hands with all Muslims who condemn terrorism – especially when it is used in the name of religion. And although it is hard to have meaningful dialogue with violent Islamists, it should not be so difficult to have serious discussion with mainstream Muslims and moderate Islamists who are aware of the crisis that has been created for Islam by terrorism carried out in the name of Islam. In this dialogue, alongside all the areas where we have common ground with Muslims, these are some of the harder questions we may want to ask:

- *We are prepared to be critical about our history; but are you prepared to be critical of yours?* You are critical and sometimes bitter about centuries of Western imperialism. But we don't often find that you are willing to admit that Islam has had its own empires.
- *What is your ideal political order?* Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan are countries which describe themselves as 'Islamic'. If a favourite slogan of Islamists is 'Islam is the answer', would you point to these or to any other countries as evidence that 'Islam is the answer'?
- *Do you accept the concept of universal human rights as they have developed in recent years?* Many of us are concerned about the clear tensions that seem to exist between internationally accepted standards of human rights and traditional Islamic values – e.g. over the status of women and freedom to practise and change one's religion.

- *What about the means that you use to achieve your goals? Does the end justify the means?* While we recognise that many Islamists are totally committed to work within the law and democratic processes, we are concerned when we hear some Islamists saying that they have no qualms about using democratic processes to subvert democracy.
- *Are you willing to accept the existence of pluralist societies?* While we understand your anger about so much that the West has done to the Muslim world, and while we weep over the many failings of Western societies, we don't like the sound of the alternative kind of society that many Islamists want to create in the West. We have seen many examples in history of what happens when religion is too closely related to the state, when faith is too closely identified with power. The oft-quoted Qur'anic text 'There is no compulsion in religion' (2:256) must mean at the very least that submission to God cannot be brought about by coercion.

Conclusion

Christians must recognise that while some Islamists apply verses in the Qur'an calling for violence directly to their situations today, many orthodox Muslims totally reject this way of interpreting the Qur'an. Since both groups are arguing on the basis of principles which they believe are genuinely Islamic, Christians need to be cautious about claiming that one approach or the other represents 'the true spirit of Islam'.

Christians also need to recognise the importance of the political issues that need to be addressed alongside the theological issues. It is vital that we continue to ask the question 'Why? What are the reasons for the anger of Muslims, and do they have good reason to be angry?'

Finally, Christians should be much bolder in bearing witness to Jesus and committing themselves to 'overcome evil with good' (Romans 12:21). As disciples of Jesus, they ought to have a distinctive way of responding to injustice and seeking to change the world.

Guest writer **Colin Chapman's** *first engagement with Islam came through working with the Church Mission Society in teaching roles in Egypt and Lebanon over seventeen years. In his last post, 1999–2003, he was lecturer in Islamic Studies at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, Lebanon. Before that he taught at Trinity College Bristol and was Principal of Crowther Hall, the former CMS Training College at Selly Oak, Birmingham. His books include:* Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenges of Islam *(IVP, 1995; new edition September 2007), and* 'Islamic Terrorism': Is there a Christian Response? *(Grove, 2005). He is now enjoying semi-retirement in Milton, Cambridge.*

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