

THE CHARLES STRONG MEMORIAL TRUST

**Identity and interaction:
Islam and the challenge of
interreligious dialogue**

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Preface

The study of Islam and of Christian-Muslim relations, indeed of interreligious dialogue in general, are fields of interest that I have grown into, as it were, over recent years. They allow me to hold together both theological and *Religionswissenschaft* interests. In many respects I am but a novice, although I have had some publications to my credit and some work in progress which has received international interest. So perhaps I have advanced somewhat past academic infancy in these fields. Some might wish to disagree. The danger of stepping into the public arena when one is largely self-taught is very much at the risk of exposing one's own ignorance, of over-stepping the mark, of falling short of expectation. As a New Zealand-based scholar of religion I find myself working in comparative isolation for most of the time. I am well aware of my limitations.

Nevertheless, I take some encouragement in that the presentations of the lecture occasioned some very positive responses, especially from younger scholars and students. It is only as we take the risk of self-exposure, open to critique and challenge, that we grow in knowledge and understanding. Always there will be someone who knows more and can perform better. But equally what we have discovered, and what we have to say, has value and validity: it is a contribution to an ongoing scholarly interchange. It breathes life into the academic conversation. It is the stuff of dialogue.

I wish to place on record my sincere thanks to Professor Norman Habel and the Charles Strong Memorial Trust who appointed me to give this lecture. I appreciated the challenge of it. I am humbled by the fact that I have been set alongside—I would not claim ranked with—a line of accomplished scholars who have been granted their turn to deliver the annual Charles Strong Memorial Lecture.

Douglas Pratt,
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Abstract¹

In the contemporary context of postmodernism and religious pluralism, Islam stands out as a religion with a strong self-identity and an ideological profile that sits uncomfortably with the post-modern age. Islam presents the contemporary western world with something of a problem.

But Islam has also been the focus, in recent years, of much dialogical activity and the fostering of good relations within both academic and ecclesiastical circles. Islam has the attention of Western scholars and the Christian Church as never before.

This paper will discuss features of Islamic identity and factors pertaining to its interaction with Western society in general and Christianity in particular. It will attempt to articulate the salient issues and clarify prospects for the future of dialogue and relationships between this religion and its apparent chief protagonists. The role of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Vatican will be briefly examined in this regard.

The paper will also explore, briefly and more generally, the question of how this complex issue relates to the contemporary situation of Australian and New Zealand societies.

¹ *Note:* This is the abstract that was submitted ahead of the lecture. The full text that follows is the developed version relative to that which was as delivered *in situ*. As is at times the case, what we set ourselves to do in prospect is not exactly what, in retrospect of the actual, we might have stated. In broad terms I endeavoured to discharge that which I set myself to do. But it was, really, a larger task than could be adequately encompassed within the frame of a single lecture. In this published version I am able to make good on some the lacunae and expand a little on some things which had received but limited treatment.

Prologue: Setting the context

Relatively speaking, both New Zealand and Australia have a similar history of religious colonialism and the shaping of our modern cultures as predominantly Eurocentric and Christian-oriented, yet decidedly secular. Christianity is the religion most don't believe in. The Church is what our citizens stay away from. But the religious demography of this part of the world is undergoing relentless change. Although Australia and, to a greater extent, New Zealand are a long way, geographically and culturally, from those parts of the world where interreligious dialogue is a relative commonplace, the fact nevertheless is that the religious 'Other', of whatever ilk, is for us nowadays likely to be a neighbour, a coworker, a fellow student. Religious architecture other than Christian can be seen adding new shape to our skylines, giving new contours to our cityscapes. Dress codes signalling specific religious allegiance—once the hallmark of pre-Vatican II Catholic Religious—now demarcate new and diverse identities.

Since 1990, when I first went to an International Islamic conference in Kuala Lumpur,² I have pursued an interest in dialogical engagement with Islam.³ This has led me not only to form positive relations with the leadership of the Muslim community in my own town, but also with the much larger community in the city of Auckland where I have been invited to speak on a number of occasions. In 1993 I was a co-convenor, together with a Muslim colleague from Malaysia, of the theology dialogue group that met daily during an eight day international summer school at the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Birmingham, England. Later, in January and February 1995, I was invited to Kuala Lumpur once again, this time to give a series of lectures and hold dialogical discussions as a visiting academic (Associate-Professor) to the International Islamic University, Malaysia. That same year I was privileged to be invited by the Arab Republic of Egypt, through its Embassy in Canberra, to attend the August conference of the Supreme Council for

² See Conference Report: International Islamic Conference, Kuala Lumpur, 25–29 June 1990; *Australian Religious Studies Review* 3, no. 1, Sept. 1990, pp. 59–60.

³ Relevant publications to date include 'Christian–Muslim relations: perceptions of encounter and perspectives on dialogue', CSIC Occasional Papers: Christian-Muslim Reflections, no. 4., Dec. 1995; 'Christian–Muslim encounter: from diatribe to dialogue', *Australian Religion Studies Review* 7, no. 1, Autumn 1994, pp. 8–15; 'Phenomenology and dialogue: a methodological consideration', *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 5, no. 1, 1994, pp. 5–13; 'The challenge of Islam: a Western Pacific perspective', in *Proceedings of the Seventh General Conference of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs. Alexandria, Egypt, 7–10 August 1995*; 'The challenge of Islam: some perspectives', *The Methodist Theological Review* 9, August 1996, pp. 25–8; 'Christian–Muslim theological encounter: the priority of *tawhid*', *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 7, no. 3, 1996, pp. 271–84; 'Statement of Alexandria: report and reflections on a conference of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, August 1995', *Australian Religious Studies Review* 9, no. 2, Spring 1996, pp. 32–8; 'The dance of dialogue: ecumenical interreligious engagement', *The Ecumenical Review* 51, no. 3, July 1999, pp. 274–87.

Islamic Affairs, held in Alexandria. In 1996 I contributed to a conference on Islamic philosophy and theology in Malaysia. In 1997 I had the honour of being invited by the Office of Inter-Religious Relations of the WCC to be a member of the joint WCC–Vatican theological consultative team to work on the concluding phase of a joint OIRR/PCID⁴ project on Interreligious Prayer.⁵

It is from this background of engagement and reflection that I come to the task at hand: addressing the issue of Islam and the challenge of interreligious dialogue with reference to the motifs of identity and interaction. To do so I have chosen to commence with a brief discussion of pluralism and postmodernism. In my view it is these interrelated dimensions of the contemporary *Zeitgeist*, these leitmotifs of global context, that contrast with—and thereby highlight the significance of—the project of dialogical engagement on the one hand, and, on the other, with the all-too frequent exclusivist reaction that emanates from the myriad varieties of religious resurgence. This latter represents the antagonistic and hostile stance towards the question of dialogue, indeed towards virtually any form of interreligious relating, that sadly marks many religious communities today. For the openness required for dialogue is rightly perceived to imply an acceptance of the ‘religious other’ as legitimate, and that is mistakenly thought, by those opposed to dialogue, to beg the question of the uniqueness of their religion. In point of fact it does not. Rather dialogue presupposes, indeed even requires, that partners to it hold and maintain their unique religious identities. Dialogue affirms difference and distinction; it does not seek to blur the boundaries but rather probes ways of better relating, understanding, and so living with and positively appreciating such difference. Dialogue is a path to peaceful coexistence and the amelioration of hostility and violence. Good interreligious dialogue, especially between Islam and Christianity, is vital to the future of humankind.

⁴ OIRR = Office of Inter-Religious Relations (WCC);
PCID = Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (Vatican)

⁵ See the joint publication of *Current Dialogue/Pro Dialogo*, issued as *Pro Dialogo* No 98, 1998/2.

Introduction: Pluralism and postmodernism

Religious plurality is a fact of our time. Yet it has always been a fact: difference, diversity, many-ness in whatever sphere of human life, has always been the case. Religion is no exception. Whilst most, if not all, religious traditions have touted unity, or internal uniformity and coherence, as a *sine qua non*, the lived reality of religious people has often been the context of, and contention with, difference of viewpoint, experience, cognition, interpretation, and hence competing claims for religious allegiance and identity. Plurality cannot be avoided. Pluralism, broadly speaking, is the stance that embraces the fact of plurality and gives it a positive interpretation with a self-reflexive edge: pluralism not only affirms plurality; it also asserts that any unitary identity within the plural mix needs to view itself as a part of that mix, not as something which contrasts with it, or stands diametrically opposed to it.

So far as Western mentality is concerned, the chief factor effecting the fresh approach to plurality is, we might say, the broadly cultural shift from **modernity** to **postmodernity**, and the accompanying cognitive shift from **modernism** to **postmodernism**. The term postmodernity names the contemporary context wherein the fact of plurality is accounted for and understood in terms of the hermeneutic of pluralism. Put otherwise, pluralism is a postmodern interpretive response to the contemporary encounter with the fact of plurality.

The term **postmodernism** refers to a way of describing and understanding the contemporary world and late twentieth century Western cultural life. Whilst this century has seen the full flowering of modernism, it has also ushered in the eclipse of modernism. As the century draws to a close, many commentators on Western culture have utilised the term **postmodern** to describe the nature of that cultural reality in its broadest sense, and the term **postmodernity** to refer more directly to the conditions and factors that are deemed to predominate in many areas of Western or Western-oriented civilisation: from architecture, art and literature, to economics, philosophy, theology, and religion. Postmodernism celebrates the **dissonance** and **diversity** that constantly eclipses any ideal or program of uniformity and conformity in whatever sphere of human endeavour.⁶ By contrast, the modernism against which postmodernism reacts is seen to be an undergirding quest for **coherence** and **unicity** of action and comprehension that has been a prime motif guiding intellectual activity as well as sociopolitical action during the recent 'modern' period of Western human

⁶ See, eg, Frederic Jameson (1994) *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*; David Harvey (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity*; David Ray Griffin et al (1989) *Varieties of Postmodern Theology*; Stanley J. Grenz (1996) *A Primer on Postmodernism*; Steven Connor (1992) *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*; T.W. Tilley, ed (1995) *Postmodern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity*; Christopher Norris (1996) *The Truth about Postmodernism*; Werner G. Jeanrond & Jennifer L. Rike, eds (1991) *Radical Pluralism & Truth: David Tracy and the Hermeneutics of Religion*.

history. It is from within the context of the discussion of contemporary pluralism and postmodernism, and an awareness of the attendant reactions and issues, that we consider the question of Islam and the dialogical challenge it presents.

Identity: Ideological contours and dynamics

A wide spectrum of humanity—over a billion people representing many different races and cultures—adheres to Islam. Yet within this diversity there may also be found a universal Islamic culture (*adab*) which includes mores, language, behaviour, and which unites Muslims across the otherwise divides of ethnicity. Personal identity is bound up with communal identity: both are located and contextualised within the bounds of time and space. Today, in many lands, Muslim people are seeking to recover and assert their identity as Muslims, and Islamic communities are seeking to shape their destiny according to Islamic ideology. This is happening all across the abode of Islam, involving countries as different as Turkey, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Nigeria, Somalia, Malaysia and Indonesia—and none of these is Arabic.

Factors of Islamic identity

In order to grasp something of the nature of Islamic identity whereby, in the context of postmodernism and pluralism, we may say it appears Islam sits somewhat uncomfortably, we shall review a range of salient factors that contribute to that identity. We will then touch on some key values and present a review of a range of ideological profiles which express something of the diversity of identity that, in fact, features within the Islamic world today.

I suggest that, in the first instance, there are six key factors which cumulatively construct the essential, or grounding, Islamic identity. Specific and local Muslim identity develops from there. These factors may be seen as interrelated. They follow, in effect, a structured sequence leading to the development of a fuller identity, as illustrated below. Certainly, as we will also see, there are other contributing elements to this fuller identity as well.

Islamic identity viewed as a function of:

- 1. Community/unity**

- *Ummah*

together with

- 2. Tradition and history**

- *Sunni/Shi'a*

together with

3. Personal piety

- *Qur'an/Sunna; Sufi*

together with

4. Daily life

- *Belief and duty*

together with

5. Geographic location

- *Ethno-religious versus transnational identification*

together with

6. Relationships & Society

- *Shari'a*

1. Community and unity—the *Ummah*

During the course of his lifetime Muhammad forged a new political identity within Arabia and laid down the basis for universal Islamic religious belief and communal life. The net result was a theocracy: a community under God, the Islamic *Ummah*. Within some thirty years of the death of Muhammad, Islam had impacted on the surrounding countries of the Near Eastern world—the expansion of Islam outside Arabia was dramatic and extensive. During these decades the leadership of the Islamic community was in the hands of series of four caliphs—leaders who were the deputies of Muhammad, continuing all his functions except one, that of being the Prophet, the ‘mouthpiece’ of God. Muhammad had been the last of those. The net result of this early emergence and development of community, with its central stress on unity and cohesion, was the postulation, and indeed execution, of a theocratic model which, though in practice over time has been variously moderated, nevertheless remains a powerful and venerated ideal. Islamic identity is grounded within community.

2. Tradition and history—Sunni/Shi'a

Early into its historical development Islam divided into two broad groups. The origins of the distinction between Sunni and Shi'a derive initially from a difference in respect to the question of the line of succession of leadership after Muhammad: Shi'a objected to the line of succession, claiming that Ali the fourth should rightly have been first, and that true leadership of the community descends from him. There were, and still are, differing views on the nature of the Islamic community and related issues of Muslim identity. Such issues are both religious and political. Today the majority (approximately 85 per cent) of Muslims belong to the Sunni group which

traditionally holds that the successor to the Prophet is no more than an elected guardian of the prophetic legacy. After all, the Qur'an is the final and perfect revelation of the Divine Will and itself declares Muhammad to be 'the Seal of the Prophets'. Therefore, any successor could only manifest a subordinate authority as leader of the believers, and consequently it would be by a process of consensus (*ijma*) that the community of believers would choose the successor. But Shi'ism holds that the principal religious figure for the ongoing community is the *Imam*, believed to be one invested with the qualities of inspired and infallible interpretation of the Qur'an, and who is in a direct line of spiritual succession from Muhammad.

Whilst in terms of basic religious belief and the dynamics of the religious life there is, arguably, little fundamental difference between Sunni and Shi'a—other than the main issues of origins and ideological variance—differences in the detail of custom and practice have certainly evolved which mark one from the other. And differences of interpretation and application of what is, in essence, a common bedrock of religion, have contributed to a history of tension between these two streams of Islamic identity including even, at times—where Sunnis and Shi'as live in close proximity to each other—violent outbursts between them.

3. Personal piety—Qur'an, Sunna and Sufism

(a) The Holy Qur'an (*Kitab Allah*—the book of Allah) is a compilation of oral recitations as uttered by the Prophet Muhammad and collected into written form in the years immediately following his death. The Qur'an is first and foremost a work of oral literature. The goal of Islamic piety has always been to recite it from memory; the written text is primarily an aid to this. Although there are translations into other languages, the process of any translation necessarily requires or involves a measure of interpretation. Thus, for Islam, it is only in the original Arabic that the true depth of meaning, and the power of mystery, emotion and fervour pertaining to the original recitation, can be expressed and experienced. Reciting the Qur'an is both a religious and an aesthetic act.

Major themes within the Qur'an include law, the previous prophets, and final judgement. There is a distinct impression that the hearer or reader is expected to have background knowledge of both the Bible—the Qur'an makes many references to biblical material—and also indigenous Arabic traditions, into which context the recitations were primarily directed. The Qur'an is believed by Islam to be the final revelation from God and has not been subject to human intervention and tampering. Its directness and immediacy attest its veracity. However, in Islamic thought, it is not the only authentic Scriptural revelation—God has given others, such as Torah and Gospel (*Injil*)—but the Qur'an is itself the consummation of, and corrective to, all that has preceded it.

(b) Whilst the Qur'an, the 'speech' of Allah, came through Muhammad, he also himself spoke and acted independently. Even as Muhammad was giving voice to the recitations, he was preaching on and about them, and giving anecdotal illustration and interpretive direction. Further, he also gave practical instruction on matters of religious belief and life: he issued edict and command, responded to questions, and provided clarification. The 'traditions' (*Sunna*) recording what Muhammad said and did in this regard were gathered into a number of collections called *hadith*. These collections carry varying weight in terms of authority, but together form the second authoritative source for Islam alongside the Qur'an.

(c) Sufism may be described as a movement of piety and mysticism which has affected and contributed to both Sunnism and Shi'ism. It is not itself another division of the *Ummah*, rather it represents an experiential element or dimension within Islam itself. Martin Lings states simply that 'Sufism is nothing other than Islamic mysticism',⁷ and that 'Sufism is necessary because it is to Islam what the heart is to the body'.⁸ And Akbar Ahmed remarks that Sufism is 'Islam's tolerant, mystical and universal philosophy'.⁹ The Sufi movement originated in pious asceticism and cut across all other divisions within Islam. It gave expression to mysticism and the contemplative ideal. It provided the counterpoint of inner-experience to the external demands of an otherwise rigorous legalism.

The way of the Sufi is the way of contemplation and pious living-out of the Islamic life. Whilst, in one sense, this could refer simply to anyone who is a good and diligent Muslim, in practice it involves the intentional pursuit of a particular path (*tariqa*) of spiritual practice as determined by a master or spiritual guide (*shaykh*). All Sufis would claim that their ultimate source and inspiration for their path is the Qur'an, together with the *Sunna* of the Prophet. But the particular path that is followed is nonetheless that usually prescribed by a Sufi Master.

4. Daily life—belief and duty

(a) Beliefs which are fundamental to Islam include, in particular, the *tawhid*, or unity, of Allah; the prophethood of Muhammad; the finality of the Qur'an; the existence of a spiritual realm; a strong eschatology or sense of ultimate destiny; the servanthood of human being; and the particularity and proper application of *jihad*. Often interpreted as a religious or Holy War, the root meaning of *jihad* is struggle, primarily the struggle against sin and unbelief within; and secondarily with unbelievers—especially those who directly challenge or deny the Islamic faith—from without. It has been said that the war with an army is but a minor *jihad*; the real struggle is against the encroachments of doubt and unbelief in the mind and heart of a believer. Unbelief is a

⁷ Lings 1993: 15.

⁸ Lings 1993: 106.

⁹ Akbar 1993: 55.

matter of neglect and forgetfulness: the intentional or unintentional falling from true belief. More broadly, *jihad* refers to an overarching obligation for Muslims, both individually and communally, to be actively engaged in the realisation of the Will of Allah by leading virtuous and upright lives, and by extending the realm and influence of Islam through education and outreach (*da'wah*). Thus *jihad* signifies that belief is activity, not just a matter of ideas.

(b) The Islamic religious life is given visible and daily concrete expression in terms of the obligations to fulfil the requirements of piety. This active life of faith is summed up in the 'five pillars', or the divinely required ordinances of duty (*arkan*): recitation of the creed, attendance to daily prayer, almsgiving, the annual fast during the month of Ramadan, and undertaking the great pilgrimage (*Hajj*) at least once in a lifetime. In respect of the *Hajj*, humility and equality are engendered by the requirement of ritual purification whereby all are clothed in plain white garments, or else are dressed in very simple national costume. All take special vows in respect of promoting pious behaviour and decorum. Attention focuses on the activities of the pilgrimage and on its devotional dimensions. Thus the pilgrimage epitomises the ritual duty incumbent on all Muslims.

It is a dramatic connection to the sacred story, walking in the footsteps of Abraham, Ishmael, and Muhammad. It is an intensely individual experience, and at the same time a moving communal experience... one human race standing together in submission to the one God.¹⁰

5. Geographic location—ethno-religious versus transnational identification

Whereas the rise of the *Ummah* eclipsed its Arab origins and resulted in a transnational entity—Islam embraces many races and ethnic identities—a significant feature of the contemporary Muslim world is that, in some cases, an identification of ethnic with religious identity has occurred. Islam presents, on the one hand, as a universalising global religion yet, on the other hand, in countries such as Turkey, Malaysia and Indonesia, for example, ethnic identity equates with religious identity. One can be a Turkish citizen and hold a religion other than Islam, but one cannot, by definition, be an ethnic Turk and not be Muslim. Similarly, ethnic Malays and Indonesians are, by definition, Muslim.

6. Relationships and society—Shari'a

Islam shares with Christianity a stress on 'right belief' as a hallmark of true religion. A Muslim is first and foremost a believer. What is believed is the message of Allah as given through the Prophet Muhammad. It is recorded in the Qur'an. It is embellished in the *Sunna* of the Prophet. It is lived out through law. Belief is not a matter of simple intellectual assent: it also has to do with living by certain principles, with the application of a perceived divine intention in respect to the business of mundane life.

¹⁰ Ludwig 1989: 232.

Much of the beliefs of Islam have to do with ways in which human beings are to live in accordance to the will of Allah. Thus for Muslims all of life is structured according to the divine law given by God. The term Shari'a means 'that which is prescribed' or 'the Path to be followed'. It is given by Allah for the guidance of his creatures. All of life, both in regard to morality and in religious duty, is a matter of service to (*ibadat*), or worship of, God. The primary goal of human existence is submission in the service of Allah.

In the early years of the Islamic community scholars expended much time and effort in striving—*ijtihad*—to work out applications to all areas of life. The different geographic locations where this was focused led, eventually, to the emergence of the four Sunni schools. Within two hundred years or so, the process of establishing the essential system was fixed. This meant that, for Sunni orthodoxy, the gate of *ijtihad* was closed. The task since then has been to pass on the law and update its practical application. Shi'a, it should be noted, because of their concept of divine guidance through the *Imam*, generally do not consider the gate of *ijtihad* to be closed; as a result, the process of developing principles and rethinking fundamentals can appear to continue more vigorously in the Shi'a world.

Identity and value structure

Religious identity is also a function of value. That is, certain values find expression in religion and, conversely, the expression of the values contributes to particular religious identity. An article in *The Times of India*¹¹ listed compassion, justice, benevolence, reason, and wisdom as among the principle values of Islam. Yet such values we might recognise as, in reality, universal: they may be found expressed in just about any religion.

More distinctive to the Islamic religion *per se* are values such as **unity**, derived from *tawhid*, and of course **submission**, that grounding of the being of all things in the particular relationship to the Creator. 'Islam' means submission to the divine will. The third distinctive value for Islam, I would suggest, is that of law—**Shari'a**—itself, in the sense of law expressing justice and giving voice to wide-ranging principles of jurisprudence: Islam is submission to living the divinely prescribed way for humanity.

Leading Muslim scholars and religious leaders are not just theologians but are also jurists: the essence of Islam is conveyed in both belief and law. There is not one without the other. Some key basic principles or values of Shari'a, and which can be seen reflected within the sociopolitical discourse of Islam and hence echoing Islamic identity, have been summarised below.¹²

¹¹ Asghari Ali, 'The basic values of Islam' (March 1999).

¹² See Doi 1984: 11.

1. Society has precedence over the individual. That is to say, the larger interest of society takes precedence over the interest of the individual.
2. Hardship relief takes precedence over the promotion of benefit. Although ‘relieving hardship’ and ‘promoting benefit’ are both among the prime objectives of the Shari’a, the former takes precedence over the latter.
3. The larger interest takes precedence over any minority interest. This means a bigger loss cannot be inflicted to relieve a smaller loss, or a bigger benefit cannot be sacrificed for a smaller one. Conversely, a smaller harm can be inflicted to avoid a bigger harm, or a smaller benefit can be sacrificed for a larger benefit.

These are not the only values that could be cited, but they are sufficient to make the point. From this brief reference to the structure of key (or lead) values played in the construction of Islamic identity, we turn to a more detailed examination of the issue of Islamic identity as a function of ideology. For, in terms of concrete sociopolitical realities, it is the various expressions of Islamic ideology that yield the specifics of identity with which, in the context of any particular dialogical engagement, we may have to contend.

Ideological profiles

Islam is found across some four dozen nations where Muslims form the majority of the populace, and throughout many other lands where Muslims are in the minority. Ideologically speaking, the Islamic nations or countries constitute one vast notional socio-geographic and religious entity—*dar al-Islam*—with which minority Muslim communities elsewhere are associated to form a single overarching religious community, the ideal of the *Ummah*. But in contrast to the ideal and ideology of the one worldwide Islamic community, there have in fact been—and indeed are today—many Muslim ‘worlds’, or particular major communities. The diversity of these Muslim worlds, so to speak, reflect varieties of contemporary political orientation and regional geography. Against the **notional** unity of the *Ummah*, undergirded by a religious ideology of unity (*tawhid*), there is today the reality of a multiplicity of **national** Islamic entities and identities. Pluralist reality co-exists in tension with the ideology of a global communal unity.

The tension between the reality of sociopolitical diversity and the ideals of religious unity is an inherent problematic within the world of Islam. One Muslim commentator has noted that:

whereas in the early centuries of development of social institutions in Islam, Islam started from a clean slate, as it were, and had to carve out *ab initio* a social fabric...[N]ow, when Muslims have to face a situation of fundamental rethinking and reconstruction, their acute problem is precisely to determine

how far to render the slate clean again and on what principles and by what methods, in order to create a new set of institutions.¹³

The view that an ethic of radical, even revolutionary, change and disruption is valid, even necessary, has predominated throughout the history of Islam. But such change was intended to effect a return to the pristine forms of the original Islamic institutional structure and religious life, not to engender further novel development of the religion. This leads to a deep inherent tension between conservative tendencies (the maintenance of the received tradition of religion) and radical tendencies (the return to the roots of religion). Each can engender change, yet each can resist further novelty: it all depends on context and circumstance. The conservative may call for revitalisation of institutions and the revival of religious sensibilities, and in the process be labelled ‘fundamentalist’. But this could apply equally to the radical who critiques the sociopolitical status quo and advocates revolutionary change in order to regain true values and the realignment of the institutional expression of Islam.

The Islamic *Ummah*, having known a period of ascendancy and an epoch of domination has, in recent centuries, fragmented and declined; many Islamic nations found themselves in submission to a colonial power. But that submission has since been cast off. It has been in response to the exigencies of the modern world, and the struggle to find identity and a place within it, or in distinction from it, that contemporary Islamic ideology needs to be understood. A range of Islamic ideological responses, or options, have arisen. These include, at one end of the spectrum, the call of the radical Islamist for total Islamisation—that is, that Islamic law should govern every part of life. At the other end of the spectrum Muslim modernists have advocated the abandonment of early Islamic politico-religious ideals in favour of the privatisation of religion. This is the model of Western secularism and, of course, it is anathema to the dedicated Islamist. But between modernist reform at one end and Islamist revivalism at the other, there are many variant positions on the spectrum of ideological option that may be—and often are—taken.¹⁴ Ideological options which have predominated in the Islamic *Ummah* during the modern era may be summarily identified as Traditionalism, Modernism, Pragmatic Secularism, and Islamism.

(i) Traditionalism

Traditionalism refers to an ideology of affirming the received traditions as practiced such that ‘change should not and does not affect the traditions of the past. Change is to be rejected.’¹⁵ This would seem to yield an entrenched conservatism, or an outlook

¹³ Rahman 1979: 214.

¹⁴ Eg, Rippin (1993: 28ff) delineates three major groupings or categories of Muslim response to the modern age: Traditionalist; Revivalist (sometimes referred to as ‘Fundamentalist’); and Modernist. Shepard (1987) classifies the variant responses as Islamic secularism, modernism, Islamism, traditionalism, and neo-traditionalism.

¹⁵ Shepard 1987: 29.

which holds to past methods and perspectives come what may. Westernisation is viewed as a ‘temptation...to be resisted’. Traditionalism is the conserving ideology, the perspective that seeks to maintain the religious tradition as such. It eschews change for change’s sake, but may employ coping mechanisms, not to effect change, but rather to uphold the tradition through changing circumstance. Variants within this category include, on the one hand, a ‘rejectionist’ hardline view (no allowance for change whatever) and, on the other, an ‘adaptationist’ stance which makes some concession, at least in respect of process, on the basis that, as a cultural entity, Islam has ‘always been able to cope with change and has built into its structures ways of dealing with change’.¹⁶ Thus, whilst its sources (Qur’an and *Sunna*) remain unchanged, novel situations could be managed by way of the institutionalised legal systems pertinent to the particular local Islamic community.

(ii) Modernism

Modernism has its genesis in the nineteenth century when the spirit of European optimism, liberality and progressivism impacted pervasively upon both European and colonial life, hence it developed in the colonised Islamic countries, and indeed any Islamic country that had a close relation to the West. But, alongside such a liberal referent, the term can refer also to the phenomenon of contemporary Islamic revivalism.

(a) In terms of the modernism of what we might call ‘classic liberalism’, Islamic modernists emerged with an ideology that attempted a defence of contemporary civilisation in terms of traditional Islam, striving to adopt whatever was perceived to be beneficial, yet retaining the framework of the Shari’a and the religious life. Modernists extract values and principles from the authority sources and traditions and argue for, and allow, modification of practice in accordance with contemporary need. Indeed, they would argue that this is in fact how the different traditions have arisen through time and what keeps a religion vibrant and relevant. Islamic modernists have generally attempted

to establish a continuity between their Islamic heritage and modern change. On the one hand, they identified with premodern revivalist movements and called for the purification of internal deficiencies and deviations. On the other, they borrowed and assimilated new ideas and values from the West.¹⁷

Liberal modernists attempt to adapt Islam to changing conditions and circumstances. To that extent they are the champions of the view that religion is a living thing; change and adaptation are a natural component of living entities of whatever type. However, the propounding of modernist *ijtihad*—that is, of promoting a radically different process of interpretation and investigation than has been traditionally the case—poses a considerable problem. For this leads to a questioning not only of

¹⁶ Shepard 1987: 29.

¹⁷ Shepard 1987: 140.

traditional ideas, but also of traditional practices, and so runs the risk of losing appeal among more traditionalist-oriented Muslim peoples, let alone the rising tide of Islamism. In short, Islamic modernism, or modernist reform, identifies a reinterpreted Islam as the basis for both political and religious life. It draws on an inherent capacity within Islam for flexibility of application and interpretation. A high idealistic valuation of Islam becomes the ideological *leitmotif* driving political engagement. It promises much but it would seem, at least in the present day, it has difficulty in successfully engaging with the broad realities of contemporary Islamic life.

(b) In what seems a paradoxical semantic twist, the appellation of ‘modernism’ can also be applied, or rather in some quarters is self-reflexively applied, to programs of contemporary Islamic revivalism. This is more appropriately discussed under the heading of ‘Islamism’ below, but it does signal the need for caution and care in the way in which these labels can be applied. They can mean different things to different people in different circumstances. The use of the appellation of ‘modernism’ in the Islamic context has to be carefully assessed.

(iii) *Pragmatic Secularism*

Pragmatic Secularism views Islam in the modern world as a purely religious phenomenon without any political dimension or force. Radical social reorganisation occurs without recourse to religious jurisdiction as was the case, for example, in communist Albania. Turkey pursued a vigorous secularising process of separating religion from politics throughout much of the twentieth century. As well as replacing the Arabic script with the Latin alphabet, Turkey’s ‘suppression of Islamic legal and educational institutions and the outlawing of mystical Sufi groups were other steps in the removal of religion from the apparatus of the state’.¹⁸ In countries that are officially secular so far as their political constitution is concerned, Islam can find itself confronted with the challenge of adjusting to, or contending with, variants of nationalism, capitalism or socialism. As a result, further pragmatic variants include ‘religious secularism’ (as in Indonesia’s multifaith system); and ‘Muslim secularism’ (as in Egypt’s constitutional placing of religion, specifically Islam, as having a role in, but not being the basis of, political life).¹⁹

(iv) *Islamism*

Islamism is the relatively recent contemporary development referring to the position of contending for the full application of Qur’anic principles and values and the dismissal of all else. Islamism, or Islamic revivalism, accepts change, albeit in a controlled fashion. It uses the religious authoritative sources of Islam (Qur’an and *Sunna*) to legitimise change. Ibrahim Karawan states that Islamism

¹⁸ Rippin 1993: 36.

¹⁹ Rippin 1993: 36.

refers to the movements and ideologies that claim Islam, as they interpret it, as the basis for restructuring contemporary states and societies according to an idealised image of Islam's founding period... Hence, Islamists talk of the need to return to Islamic roots and a 'golden age'.²⁰

The singular defining characteristic of Islamism is the concern to gain political power: religion is not confined to the realm of the private and personal, but is necessarily in the public domain and so carries with it an active concern for the political life of the society. Therefore obtaining the controlling interest in politics is critical for Islamists 'if they are to reshape society, politics, the economy and culture in accordance with what they deem to be God's ultimate will'.²¹

Muslim revivalist movements are often also characterised by their concern for the perceived socio-moral decline of Muslims and, when this applies, they advocate an intentional return to the origins of the religion and the shedding of all accretions of legal and mystic traditions. They tend also to reject the predeterministic outlook of popularist Islam and the dominant theology of the day, and in some circumstances they are inclined to effect, or at least attempt, revivalist reform through armed force. The Islamic revivalist will use the authority sources of past tradition to legitimate present-day change in the sense of an active promotion of change from an unsatisfactory state of affairs to that of an ideal 'what should be'. Thus the goal of establishing an Islamic state is viewed as a necessary precursor to achieving an Islamic society, *per se*.

Islamism explored

(i) *Islamist themes*

Makmud Faksh identifies a set of five 'synthesised themes' that demonstrate the nature of Islamism.²² The first is the **fusion of religion and politics**, which is the expression of the holistic view of Islam as

both an ideology and a system of life comprising religious, legal, and moral aspects in accordance with God's commands, establishment of an Islamic order is prerequisite to the actualisation of Muslim life.²³

The second is the notion of **Divine Sovereignty** or Rule (*Hakimiyya*) which expresses a cardinal principle of Islamism wherein the political order is subservient to the rules of Shari'a: human rulers and political leaders are merely God's representatives and are to be judged according to the fidelity and integrity of their representation. The third theme is that of **Islamic authenticity** being asserted over against *jahiliyya*, the state of spiritual ignorance. A shared element in Islamic revivalist discourse is the 'restoration and reassertion of Islamic authenticity in response to Western

²⁰ Karawan 1997: 7.

²¹ Karawan 1997: 7.

²² Faksh 1997.

²³ Karawan 1997: 5.

hegemony'.²⁴ The new *jahiliyya* against which Islam is pitted is the seduction of Western culture and values viewed as inherently antithetical to Islamic culture and values. Islamic **universalism** (as in the *Ummah*) over against nationalist particularism (*qawmiyya*) constitutes the fourth theme. The contemporary *jahiliyya* is viewed as an expression of secularity and nation-statehood within the world of Islam. Therefore, any and all forms of nationalism, including pan-Arab nationalism, are to be rejected on this view. The fifth and final theme, one which redounds throughout much revivalist and fundamentalist literature and rhetoric, is that of *jihad*. The dynamic and comprehensive interpretation of this core religious motif, whose root meaning has to do with the constant struggle for belief over unbelief; the right and the good over against error and evil, gives a sharp edge to revivalist ideologies.

(ii) Islamist orientation

Ibrahim Karawan identifies Islamists as falling into two broad categories, viz militant Islamists and political Islamists. The former combine 'ideological purity and deep contempt for political compromise with a keen sense of urgency for direct Islamic action'. They tend 'to act as dedicated fighters against states which they see as embodying contemporary "ignorance"—*jahiliyya*'.²⁵ Militant Islamists will pursue destructive and destabilising strategies in the interests of waging a war of attrition against the State. As the current sociopolitical order is, by definition as it were, totally rejected by a militant perspective, such Islamists continue the struggle for as long as it takes: surrender is unthinkable, compromise anathema—anything less than the achievement of the goal is tantamount to apostasy. However, it is the nature of this phenomenon that militant groups are highly competitive, fractious and exclusivist. As a movement, militant Islamism is highly fissiparous.²⁶

By contrast, political Islamists are inclined to pursue more constructive and social-supportive strategies.

Political Islamists believe that violent struggle is futile and self-defeating, and reject the assumptions of urgency advocated by militants...[V]iolent struggle against regimes is futile, and offers those regimes the opportunity ruthlessly to suppress *all* Islamic movements and activists. Political Islamist leaders focus instead on propagating *al-da'wa* (the 'Islamic Call') and purifying individual minds, and society as a whole, of all traces of secularism.²⁷

(iii) Islamist framework

John Esposito has summarised the ideological framework of Islamic revivalism, or Islamism,²⁸ as follows:

²⁴ Karawan 1997: 8.

²⁵ Karawan 1997: 16.

²⁶ Karawan 1997, *passim*.

²⁷ Karawan 1997: 20.

²⁸ Esposito 1994: 163.

- Islam is a total and comprehensive way of life;
- the failure of Muslim societies is due to their departure from the ‘straight path of Islam’ and their following a Western secular path;
- the renewal of society requires a return to Islam and the advancement of an Islamic religio-political and social reformation or revolution;
- Western-inspired civil codes must be replaced by Islamic law, which is the only acceptable blueprint for Muslim society;
- although Westernisation of society is condemned, modernisation as such is not, that is to say, science and technology are accepted, but they are to be subordinated to Islamic belief and values;
- the process of Islamisation requires organisations or associations of dedicated and trained Muslims.

This framework provides an overview sketch of Islamism and incorporates the essential features. And yet Islamism can be even more radical or revolutionary.

(iv) Radical Islamist ideology

Esposito also points out that radical Islamists will go much further, advocating violent revolution. They can be viewed as being marked out ideologically as **crusading, imperative, impositional, oppositional, divinely sanctioned, and intensely exclusive**.

The **crusading** element refers to a mentality in Islam that stands opposed, and aggressively reacts, to all colonialism, and especially to Zionism, which is firmly cast in a colonising mode.

The **imperative** element is the view that an Islamic government is not simply an alternative political option but a divine imperative, an option for which there is no choice if one is to remain within the faith of Islam.

The **impositional** element refers to the criticism of Muslim governments when perceived as not following Shari’a wherein political leaders who are adjudged atheists or apostates are *ipso facto* subject to the full imposition of *jihad*.

Opposition to such governments is often extended to the religious establishment (ie, *ulama*, mosques...) deemed to be coopted by the status-quo government, hence the distinct **oppositional** element of radical Islamism.

The element of being **divinely sanctioned** refers to the view that *jihad* against such unbelief and unbelievers is in fact a religious duty. As actions undertaken in the exercise of that duty are sanctioned by Allah, they do not fall under the norms of ethical behaviour.

Finally, Christians and Jews are generally regarded as unbelievers rather than ‘Peoples of the Book’ because of their connections with Western (Christian)

colonialism and Zionism; only Islam is the pure and true divinely inspired and sanctioned religion. This position results in a form of **intensely exclusive** religious identity.

It must, of course, be stressed that the vast majority of Muslim people are moderate in their outlook. For many Muslims, reform would be seen as something that occurs through the gradual transformation of Muslim society rather than being effected through violent revolution, which in reality is a minority perspective, even though it is the one that hits the headlines.

Islamism is a multifaceted phenomenon. It involves piety, yet increased devotion doesn't just focus on religious observance but also on 'the social, economic, and political application of Islamic values'.²⁹ The critical factor is that it is Islam, and not a secular ideology, which shapes attitudes and directs actions. Islamism involves a high level conscientisation process and a deeply held intentionality. Further, there are many disquieting elements associated with the development process which act as catalysts for revival together with a wide range and number of attempts to make Islam politically relevant. Religion is cast in the role of the critic of government. But there is no overall coordination to the phenomenon of Islamic revivalism. Rather it is marked by a high level of idiosyncrasy and local flavour: 'the form that revival takes and the effect that it produces vary according to circumstance and place'.³⁰ And, of course, revivalism within Islam attracts a perception of militancy as a function of the way in which it has 'has captured most attention in the West and generated negative, undifferentiated images'.³¹

Having explored the question of Islamic identity as a function of a set of interrelating factors and values, and having reviewed the question of ideological profiles, we turn now to the theme of interaction where the focus will be on dialogical engagement in the twentieth century.

Interaction: Dialogical initiative and response

The twentieth century has seen many developments in dialogical engagement between Muslims and Christians ranging from a diversity of local events to international initiatives sponsored by the WCC or the Vatican.³² Through these two organisations, the Christian Church, at a global level, has engaged in promoting good Christian-

²⁹ Esposito 1994: 37.

³⁰ Esposito 1994: 38.

³¹ Esposito 1994: 38.

³² Pratt 1999.

Muslim relations, especially since the late 1960s. This has been, in part, a culmination of wider developments in interreligious dialogue which have occurred during this century.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the predominant Christian attitude towards people of other faiths could be described as, at best, paternalistic. Muslims, if viewed in a positive light at all, would most likely be seen as religious ‘cousins’: distantly related, part of the wider religious ‘family’, but definitely poor relations theologically. The concerns of evangelical proclamation and salvific conversion were uppermost. Relations with the religiously ‘other’ were, in varying degrees, subordinate to missionary imperatives. Dialogue, as we might think of it today, was not part of the ecclesial vocabulary.

Yet there were voices raised from within the mission fields that signalled the beginnings of change. Men and women whose initial zeal to convert—necessarily premised on some notion of the religious superiority and priority of Christianity—had encountered depths of religion and vistas of spirituality which had given pause for thought. Maybe another approach was required. Perhaps we should talk with, rather than at, the person of another faith.

The Vatican and dialogue with Islam

Up until the 1960s the Roman Catholic Church, to all intents and purposes, lived wholly within the framework of its own world view: acknowledgment of the ‘religiously other’—even other Christian Churches—was muted. Certainly no salvific value was accorded to any other religion, and the notion of establishing dialogical relationship with any other religious community or tradition was a fringe idea in the extreme. Religious exclusivism held sway. But then the far-sighted Pope John XXIII called a special council at the Vatican which met on a number of occasions between 1961 and 1965.

Catholic interest in interreligious dialogue emerging from Vatican II can be set in the context of the Papal encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* issued by Paul VI³³ in 1964. This presents a model of the relationship of the Church and the world in which is set the value of relating positively to other faiths. However, it reflected the same sort of dialectical tension that is found in WCC statements: on the one hand dialogue is promoted as expressing an openness towards persons of other religions; on the other hand the finality and supremacy of Christ, and the mission of the Church in that regard, is unequivocally affirmed. Nevertheless, one Muslim scholar notes that in

³³ Pope John XXIII had died during the course of Vatican II and the newly elected Pontiff took the name Paul VI.

respect of Islam the Vatican moved ‘from a position of condemnation to the acknowledgment that Muslim beliefs are a set of beliefs in their own right’.³⁴

The overriding concern of Vatican II was pastoral: innovation in both policy and practice was aimed at enhancing the life of the Church and its people. Accordingly, a special office, the Secretariat for Non-Christians, was established in 1964³⁵ to oversee relationships between Catholics and other non-Christian religions. It has since been renamed the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.³⁶ The early work of the Secretariat was focused on preparing Church members for dialogue with other faiths and the production of a range of publications. By 1967 a special adjunct office for promoting relations with Muslims was opened.³⁷

Perhaps the most important document to come from Vatican II so far as the question of dialogue is concerned is *Nostra Aetate*, a declaration on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions. It states that the

Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men [*sic*].³⁸

Nostra Aetate speaks of the Church’s ‘high regard for the Muslims’ and goes on to acknowledge the ‘many quarrels and dissensions’ that have obtained in the past, yet the Church is seeking to go beyond that and urges ‘that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding’.

Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s the Secretariat for Non-Christians was very active in fostering and facilitating Christian-Muslim bi-lateral dialogues and reciprocal visits and relations of various kinds, together with promoting wider ecumenical cooperation and consultation in respect of interreligious dialogue. In more recent years its successor, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, has continued to work in close collaboration with the WCC’s Office for Inter-Religious Relations as well as fostering and supporting a wide variety of dialogical ventures throughout the Catholic world.

Islam and the World Council of Churches

Under the auspices of the WCC a dialogue between Muslims and Christians with the theme of ‘Christian–Muslim Conversations’ was held in March 1969 in Cartigny, Switzerland. It was ‘an attempt to take up the developing interfaith conversation on an

³⁴ Siddiqui 1997: 35.

³⁵ Paul VI, Apostolic Letter, May 19, 1964. See Gioia 1997: 63f.; 121f.

³⁶ *Pastor Bonus*, Apostolic Constitution of John Paul II, (June 28, 1988). See Gioia 1997: 429ff.; 658f. Cf Fitzgerald 1989.

³⁷ Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution, Aug. 15, 1967. See Gioia 1997: 80f.

³⁸ Gioia 1997: 38.

international level',³⁹ recognising, at the same time, that dialogical engagement was already taking place at the local level and in a variety of modalities. The outcome of this meeting noted the necessity for dialogue and that the two religions, Islam and Christianity, have in common the same God, but that they have different historical theologies. Furthermore it was stated that the

aim of dialogue cannot consist in arriving at artificial agreement. The encounter must not succumb to either syncretism or relativism. Dialogue must open the way for the two religions, on the basis of both their common ground and what is distinctive to each, to meet and ask each other the true questions.⁴⁰

Prior to the seventh Assembly of the WCC, held in Canberra in 1991, a major meeting of the Dialogue Working Group was held in Casablanca, Morocco. A number of points to emerge from it are worth noting. In respect to the vexed theme of mission and dialogue there was acknowledgment of 'the growing reality of pluralism' and the pressing need to advocate interfaith dialogue. On the one hand, dialogue was promoted as an enrichment; on the other, there was acknowledgment of continuing obstacles such as scepticism of the value of dialogue; mistrust of motives for dialogue; a fear of syncretism; and concern about compromise. In particular it was noted that 'Muslims are nervous about the "Christianization" of individuals, while Christians are nervous about the "Islamization" of the whole society'.⁴¹

In 1990 the Dialogue sub-unit had been merged with the general Secretariat and reformed as an 'Office'. Thus, in the final decade of the twentieth century, the dialogical work of the WCC has been continued by the Office for Inter-Religious Relations (OIRR). Both the WCC and the Vatican, as stakeholders in the ecumenical interreligious dialogical enterprise, have made, and continue to make, significant advances. Overall, the latter decades of the twentieth century have seen considerable developments, from both Protestant and Catholic sides, so far as Christian–Muslim relations and dialogue are concerned. However, in both cases, the quest for dialogue has been in some respect hamstrung by the perceived imperative to engage in mission and proclamation.

The dominant dialectic that exists in both the Roman Catholic and the WCC contexts is the tension between evangelism and dialogue—or between those who promote conversion as against those who promote conversation—as the primary mode of relating to the religious other, including especially Muslims. Despite the promotion of a discourse of mutuality, the prospect for dialogue is too often overshadowed by the suspicion on the part of the prospective dialogical partner of the existence of another agenda underlying the overtures from the Christian side.

³⁹ Brown 1989: 3.

⁴⁰ Brown 1989: 4.

⁴¹ Brown 1989: 16.

A further problem has been noted, especially in respect of dialogue with Muslims, and that is the matter of institutional imbalance. The Muslim scholar, Ataulah Siddiqui, has noted that, in contrast with the Christian context, Muslim institutions do not express the same enthusiasm that the Churches and their units and councils show on the question of dialogue. In a sense, Muslim institutions respond as institutions as far as dialogue is concerned, but are not initiators of dialogue with other religions and beliefs.⁴²

A grasp of pertinent historical and political factors is important in attempting to understand this difference. Many Muslim countries have had their energies and agendas taken up by their various struggles to come out from under Western colonial domination. Questions addressed by Muslims in these countries were more likely to be about 'how to counter the Western political forces who were occupying their lands and were in control of all their important institutions'⁴³ than addressing finer theological points of interreligious debate. A history of coping with colonial domination, coupled with fending off the encroaching activities of aggressive missionaries, has coloured, if not soured, prospects for dialogue between Islam and Christianity in many places and situations. Furthermore, as the Muslim intelligentsia in many lands were educated within a Western secular system, so a new breed of Islamic leadership has arisen which has not necessarily been interested in, nor amenable to, dialogical overtures. On the one hand, there have been those who themselves imbibed the secularist and materialist values of so-called Western culture; on the other, there have been others who, whilst employing Western-derived educational and political strategies, were in fact inspired by an Islamic agenda.

Principles of dialogical engagement

A threefold aim of Christian–Muslim dialogue emerged out of early WCC consultations and can be summarised as follows:

1. Dialogue should lead both religions to greater mutual respect and better understanding of each other.
2. Dialogue should raise questions which can lead each of the religions to a deepening and a renewal of spirituality.
3. Dialogue should lead both Christians and Muslims to accept and fulfil common practical responsibilities.

Although later on there also emerged an acknowledgment of a context of widespread distrust of dialogue from within both religions, the following principles of dialogical engagement⁴⁴ were nevertheless enunciated:

Each partner should aim to achieve:

- understanding of common and distinctive elements in each other's faith, history and civilisation;
- respect for each other's religious and cultural integrity;

⁴² Siddiqui, 1997: xvi.

⁴³ Siddiqui, 1997: 5.

⁴⁴ See Brown 1989: 88.

- common commitment to strive for social justice and for responsible development of the earth's resources;
- a mutually challenging enrichment of spirituality which may also be a challenge to secular neighbours.

Each partner should aim to avoid:

- unfair comparison or caricature;
- any attempt to impose a syncretistic solution;
- complacency about static co-existence;
- defensive and hostile attitudes to secular neighbours.

To what extent these principles, designed to guide dialogical engagement, have been conscientiously applied at a local level would be a matter of conjecture and would require careful investigation to ascertain. In some parts of the world there have been notable advances made by the intentional application of principles such as these.⁴⁵ But let us now turn to the question of dialogue with Islam in the context of our region.

Australia And New Zealand: immigrant Islam

In 1980, at a meeting held in Kuala Lumpur, delegates from some sixteen Asian Muslim countries established RISEAP—the Regional Islamic Da’wah Council of Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Malaysian and Saudi governments were to be the main providers of funds for this new regional organisation. The coverage of this organisation includes countries such as Australia and New Zealand. The incursion of Islam into Australia and New Zealand, whilst at one level belonging to the greater South-East Asian region, really is another story, a story of immigrant Islam⁴⁶—and, more recently, the Islam of the refugee.

Muslim immigrants from south-west Asia were brought into Australia during the nineteenth century as part of the transmigration of labour that took place within the British colonial system. Nothing survives of these first Muslims other than Australia’s oldest mosque—‘a corrugated iron building in the mining town of Broken Hill dating from 1891’—together with the name of the railway train, ‘The Ghan’.⁴⁷ It was not until after World War II that permanent Islamic communities became established in Australia, a legacy of the mass migration to Australia that has been such a significant feature during the second half of the twentieth century. Nowadays, ‘Australian Muslims have their origins in every continent and from many ethnic and racial backgrounds constituting a truly international community of believers’.⁴⁸ Overarching the various and diverse local communities of Muslims is the Australian Federation of

⁴⁵ See, eg, Kuttianimattathil 1995; Kroeger 1990.

⁴⁶ Westerlund & Svanberg 1999: 278-94.

⁴⁷ Westerlund & Svanberg 1999: 278.

⁴⁸ Westerlund & Svanberg 1999: 280.

Islamic Councils. Islam in Australia reflects the worldwide *Ummah*—it is ethnically diverse. It also contains considerable sectarian diversity: Sunni, Shi'a, Ismaili, Alawite, Druze and Ahmadiyya. That there is need for engagement in relations and dialogue with Muslims and the Islamic communities within Australia is signalled by the fact that Muslims often encounter prejudice from within the wider society. If there is any truth to the statement—and I have no reason to doubt it—that the 'contemporary international cultural identity of Islam as politically turbulent and inspired by religious fundamentalism has served to reinforce the general suspicion towards all Muslim immigrants in Australia'⁵⁰, then clearly the need to engage in and promote positive dialogical interaction is urgent.

Similar things could be said of the New Zealand context. In both countries the Muslim percentage of the total population is small, only more so in New Zealand's case.⁵¹ New Zealand's Muslim population, like that of Australia, is ethnically diverse. However, in New Zealand's case, the largest proportion are of Indian origin, and have come mostly via Fiji. More recently there have been influxes of Muslim refugees, especially from Bosnia and Somalia. Apart from citizens and permanent residents, New Zealand also hosts many hundreds of Muslim students, particularly from South-East Asia. Muslims, overall, fare well enough in the New Zealand context it would seem.

On the whole recent immigrants seem to see New Zealand as a tolerant place though they are concerned about maintaining their Muslim identity and raising their children in a society whose standards on such matters as sexual morality and parental authority seem unduly lax.⁵²

Muslims in New Zealand began to organise themselves into local formal associations from the middle of the twentieth century. 'Depending on numbers and resources, the associations provide for the main religious services, including *salat*, prayers and activities for Ramadan and the main festivals, as well as basic religious teaching.'⁵⁴ Subsequently an umbrella organisation, the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand (FIANZ), was formed in 1979 to provide a point of reference, especially in respect of relations with government and the local media, as well as for contact with the international Islamic world; and generally to oversee the activities of the various local communities. FIANZ, for example, plays a particularly important role in

⁴⁹ Westerlund & Svanberg 1999: 286.

⁵⁰ Westerlund & Svanberg 1999: 286.

⁵¹ The New Zealand census, 1996, showed Muslims at 0.37 per cent (13,545) of a total population of 3.6 million. This compares with 150,000 Australian Muslims representing about 0.83 per cent of the total population.

⁵² Westerlund & Svanberg 1999: 289.

⁵³ Westerlund & Svanberg 1999: 290.

⁵⁴ Westerlund & Svanberg 1999: 290.

the certification of *halal* slaughtering in respect to New Zealand's meat export industry.

Whilst ethnic diversity is certainly a feature of the Muslim community in New Zealand, unlike the situation in contemporary Australia, there is an absence of any significant sectarian diversity. Nevertheless, living in a society whose perception of Muslims and things Islamic is, as in Australia, informed largely by globalised media images evoking stereotypes, suggests that here in New Zealand, too, there is a need for good dialogical interaction between Islam and the wider society. Such engagement in New Zealand is just as important and urgent as elsewhere. Indeed, in late 1997, a new mosque was opened in the rural city of Hamilton; in May 1998, the mosque was gutted in an early morning arson attack. This event shocked the community as a whole—both locally and nationally. It was, of course, severely traumatic for the Muslim community, especially the Somali contingent, newly arrived as refugees from their own context of violence and destruction. Happily, however, not only has the mosque been rebuilt but the wider community—with some church groups and the local Jewish community to the fore—raised sufficient funds over and above the insurance pay-out such that the mosque is now well protected by a high fence and security system. A dialogue of engaged action of sorts took place. But more and better dialogical engagements are called for nonetheless.

Indonesia: our Muslim neighbour

Alongside of the realities of the Islamic component within Australia and New Zealand, the question of engaging dialogically with Islam in our region must also take cognisance of the existence of Islam of South-East Asia, in particular that of Indonesia, which of late has loomed large in terms of regional politics and international affairs. We are not only having to deal with the question of the Muslim neighbour within our communities; we also have before us the issue of the largest Muslim country in the world as our geographic neighbour.

Islam in the South-East Asian region reflects a dimension not found so readily elsewhere in the Islamic world, namely the effect of religio-cultural interaction over time and the contextual reality of religious—as well as the cultural—pluralism in which the Islam of this region is set. Islam infiltrated into South-East Asia largely through the efforts of Sunni traders and Sufi mystics in the pre-modern period. The influence of Sufism enabled an accommodation of the incoming religion to

‘traditional, pre-Islamic mysticism’⁵⁶ and thus to the rise of a more eclectic and moderated Islam than found, for example, in the Middle East.

Muslims have a historic experience of interacting with other religious traditions... In Indonesia and the Philippines, the Muslim interaction with other religious traditions brought about conflicts. When Islam was victorious, negative elements were purged out; or, where the native population successfully resisted the inroads of Islam, as in Hindu Bali or Christian Mindanao, an adaptation of Islam took place, and it served as a prop for an already existing structure.⁵⁷

Indonesia has been a modern independent nation-state since 1945. So, with some 90 per cent of the population identifying as Muslim, Indonesia is numerically the largest Muslim country in the world. However, Kratz comments that

Indonesian Muslims like other religious groups disagree on a number of theological issues, and these differing theological views have found an echo in the formation of a range of competing social and political organisations. These organisations within Islam are habitually divided and have hardly ever been able to form a united front against the secular nationalists.⁵⁸

There are many Muslim communities within Indonesia, but all follow, like Malaysia, the Shafi’i school of law. While it is the largest Muslim nation, Indonesia is not an Islamic State as such.

Constitutionally it is a unitary state that embodies and exemplifies a state philosophy called the *Pancasila* (Five Principles)...[T]hese are set out as belief in the one Supreme God; a just and civilized humanity; the unity of Indonesia; democracy led by the wisdom of unanimity arising from deliberations among representatives of the people, and social justice for the whole people of Indonesia.⁵⁹

This would seem to set a positive note and suggest a context for harmonious interreligious relations. However, recent communal unrest that is as much religiously as ethnically based tells another tale. Hilario M. Gomez some time ago noted the Christian complaint, for example, that the ‘Indonesian government’s resettlement policy is a deliberate tactic to Islamize the Christian areas’. Gomez also stated that

many Christian leaders see the government’s ideology/philosophy of *pancasila* as a safeguard against the demands from more zealous or fanatic Muslims for a more Islamic state. (Yet)...many observers have pointed out that Islamization or resurgent Islam in Indonesia is also a means for deepening the Muslim’s awareness of their religion.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Clarke 1990: 132.

⁵⁶ Clarke 1990: 132.

⁵⁷ Rajashekar & Wilson 1992: 43.

⁵⁸ Clarke 1990: 142.

⁵⁹ Esposito 1987: 203.

⁶⁰ In Rajashekar & Wilson 1992: 49.

Recent social unrest, the debacle of East Timor, the slow and painful transition to democracy and recurring Islamic calls for *jihad* against Christians—and evidence of that acted out—all mean that the context of Indonesia, and the Islam it represents, is complex and fluid. We can do no more here than acknowledge it as a critical factor in the overall picture we are dealing with in addressing our subject. It is to be neither over-stated nor under-estimated, but rather realistically appraised relative to complex local sociopolitical realities.

Conclusion: Where to?

By way of a conclusion we may ask the question: where do we go to from here? What are the essential features and factors we ought to take note of as we contemplate, let alone prepare to engage in, the future with Islam. An obvious element to take account of is the dialectic of unity and diversity in Islam. A.R. Norton,⁶¹ against the thesis of Samuel Huntington, debunks the myth of ‘monolithic Islam’. Islam is a diverse phenomenon. There is no ‘one’ Islam with which to dialogue; no single Muslim identity as such with which an interlocuter can engage. Furthermore, despite the image of Islam as unified in its juxtaposition of religion and politics, Norton holds that against this ‘cliched truism of no distinction between religion and politics for Islam, many millions of (middle class) Muslims do make and live by a practical distinction’.⁶² He also cites a range of examples and contemporary ‘intimations of Islamic openness to pluralism and tolerance’ from various quarters of the Islamic world. Islam is no behemoth, no great monster to be feared. It is a dynamic religion and culture which, although containing diversity, certainly does have threads of cohesion and unity nonetheless. But in terms of dialogic engagement it is both the unity and the diversity which have to be taken into account. This means, of course, that regional and local relativities are important factors, as too are matters of the dialogical modalities wherein engagement may be entered.

In my view one of the critical areas of dialogical interaction, yet to be engaged in any sustained way, is that of theological encounter. This arena is crucial, but it is also exceedingly difficult. Much good interaction and dialogue can take place in respect of other areas of concern—moral, sociopolitical, economic, ecological, to name but a few. Nevertheless, fundamental beliefs, and critical expressions of faith, which are those things that signal the bedrock of our world views, need to be seriously and sensitively addressed. It is, perhaps, the clue as to where dialogue is yet to go, and must go, in the coming century. The dialogical conversation is far from played out. In many ways it has only just begun.

⁶¹ Norton 1999.

⁶² Norton 1999: 9.

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