Some Misunderstandings and Stumbling Blocks for Muslims in understanding the Bible

It is over 50 years since I first went to the Arab World. After a brief attempt at studying Arabic in Jordan and a more prolonged attempt in Saudi Arabia, I have had the privilege of visiting many Muslim countries both in the Arab World and in Iran, Afghanistan, much of Central Asia, Pakistan, India (especially U.P.), Bangladesh, Malaysia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

From my many Muslim friends I have learned about their fairly typical misunderstandings of Christianity. I would like to share some of these insights to help you avoid them as you talk with your Muslim friends. We must always remember that it is just as easy for us Christians to misunderstand Islam as it is the other way round. Sadly Muslims have often been misunderstood by Christians. This was worse in the 18th and 19th centuries where one "authority" described Muhammad as the "Arab Deceiver". Such derogatory statements shouldn't be believed or repeated!

At 18th and 19th century church meetings when presenting the need to reach the world with the Gospel, speakers often spoke about Islam in a way that was just not true. They did this completely innocently. Why? It was because they had worked in a village or a small section of the town and had made the mistake of assuming that all Muslims everywhere believed and behaved as those in the place where they lived. They assumed this was the authentic teaching of Islam. Of course this is quite unfair! At that time, in many parts of Egypt the villagers would tell you they were treated as if they had no hope – especially the women. This is simply not true! Islam teaches that believing Muslim women who keep the Five Pillars of Islam may eventually enter Paradise after death.

So it is easy to assume that the impression of Islam gained from living in one place – perhaps among those who are not very well educated – is the universal teaching of Islam. If you went to a remote village in the Irish Republic and analysed their understanding and beliefs about Christianity and then assumed they represented the authentic teaching of the New Testament, you would be mistaken!

I would like to focus on two main Muslim misunderstandings of Christianity that you will find in the minds of your Muslim friends even if they are too polite to vocalise these to you.

1. <u>The Concept of the Trinity</u>

It is impossible to deal adequately with such a vital truth in a short article. Here are a few points:

The Muslim understanding is that Christians believe in three gods – God the Father, the Virgin Mary and their son Jesus. This actually looks very much like the impression Muhammad himself had. We read in the Quran, *"Me, and my mother was beside God."* If this was the impression Muhammad had, where do you think he got it?

There has been a great deal of speculation on this subject. Some think Muhammad met a heterodox group of "Christians" called the Collridians who actually did worship the Virgin Mary. Others have different ideas. Perhaps the excessive veneration of Mary by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches was the cause of this assumption of the position of Mary.

In any case, this is the way Muhammad understood the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. So it isn't surprising he should denounce the whole idea as the most terrible blasphemy. It certainly would be that if it were true! The very idea of God the Father producing a child by having sex with a woman is abhorrent.

But this is <u>not</u> the Christian doctrine of the Trinity! It is vital to emphasise that Christians believe in one God just as much as our Muslim friends. The doctrine of the <u>Unity of the Godhead</u> is the

central doctrine of Judaism – ***"The Lord our God is one Lord."*** (Deut. 6:4; Mk. 12:29) The same statement came from the lips of the Lord Jesus, ***"I and the Father are one"***. (Jn. 10:30). There are other interesting statements in the epistles such as James 2:19, ***"You believe that God is one, you do well, even the demons believe that and shudder"***.

So this is something all Jews believe, all Christians believe and even the devils in hell know it is true! So the doctrine of the Unity of the Godhead is not something any real Christian would hesitate about for one minute. Christians, Jews and Muslims believe exactly the same – there is only one God.

So how does the idea of Trinity come in? In ordinary language, the Trinity is integral to the nature of God in its complete unity in the Godhead. As Christians, we have learned this by divine revelation and by experience. Inside the Unity of the Godhead we can distinguish – even with our very limited human language – three aspects of the Godhead. These are sometimes termed three persons. Any human simile or picture is bound to be inadequate! But here is a simple picture. I will liken it to myself. I am made up of a physical body. I have a mind and I have a God-given spirit. But I am not three separate individuals. I am one personality but within this personality you can distinguish at least three aspects.

Here is a better illustration from Islam. In the early history of Islam there were some people called the Mutabbla. There was a dispute between the Mutabbla Muslims and the Orthodox Muslims – i.e. Sunni Muslims – concerning the Quran. Was it an eternal book and so uncreated or was it created? Orthodox Muslims said the Quran was eternal and uncreated. But the Mutabbla said, "If you really believe that you cease to believe in one God because anything that is eternal and uncreated is God. If you believe the Quran is eternal and uncreated, you believe in God Himself and in the Quran!"

Orthodox Muslims said, "No! No! God not only has an eternal essence (the Divine Presence), but He also has eternal qualities. One of these is that God is a 'speaker' and the speaker must have speech. So if God has been a speaker from eternity, He must have had speech from eternity and the speech of God is the meaning of the Quran.

The Mutabbla responded to the Orthodox Muslims, "Now you are in a worse position than ever because you have said God has a number of eternal qualities. He is not only a speaker; He is a number of other things as well. You say there is only one God and yet you also believe in several more qualities of the Godhead".

Again the Orthodox said, "Oh no!" Eventually it was agreed that the speech of God was neither identical with God's essence nor distinguishable from it. So the Quran as the word of God was not identical to divine essence nor was it separate from it.

Now this is not the Christian concept of the Trinity! But at least it may help your Muslim friends understand what we mean by the Biblical teaching of the nature of the Trinity. Both in the New Testament and in the Quran, the Lord Jesus is called, 'the Word of God'. John's Gospel begins with, ***"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God. He was with God in the beginning"***. (Jn. 1:1-2) So the Word was not identical to God (the Father) in the sense that we can't distinguish between them at all. At the same time, they are not separable from the Godhead.

- **The Deity of the Lord Jesus**

I want to emphasise another factor about the Trinity. Christians did not come to believe in the Trinity from early metaphysical speculations, but rather through our experience of God in our lives and through the revelation in the New Testament. The Lord Jesus came to the Jews and in the beginning they thought He was just a religious teacher – a Rabbi – or perhaps more than that – one of the prophets. The disciples began to follow Jesus about and listen to His teaching and see how He dealt with individuals. Remember that these first disciples were all Jews. They believed passionately in the absolute unity of the Godhead.

They followed the Lord Jesus for about three years and slowly they began to realise that there was no easy way to explain Him as a mere man. They heard His teaching. It was teaching that the world had never heard before or since. It was spoken with such certainty and authority. They saw the amazing way He dealt with individuals – His works of love and mercy. They saw what must have been the most outstanding miracle of all – the miracle of a totally sinless life! They heard the most fantastic claims that fell almost quietly but very confidently from His lips. On one occasion He said, ***"I am the Light of the World. He who follows Me, shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life"***. (Jn. 8:12)

What an amazing statement to make! How can we understand this? On another occasion He said, ***"I am the Bread of Life, he who comes to Me shall never hunger. He who believes in Me shall never thirst"***. (Jn. 6:35) this is an absolutely fantastic statement! Perhaps we could paraphrase this, 'I am satisfaction and the man or the woman who comes to Me will be completely satisfied'.

I will just quote one last occasion. At the end of His life one of His disciples said to Him, ***"Lord you have often talked to us about God being Your Heavenly Father. Just show us this Heavenly Father and it will be enough."*** The Lord Jesus replied, ***"Have I been such a long time with you and yet you haven't known Me Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father*** (!) ***How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me? The words I say to you are not just My own. Rather, it is the Father living in Me who is doing His work. Believe Me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves"***. (Jn. 4:8-11)

The Lord Jesus also said, ***"I and My Father are One"***. (Jn. 10:30). There is far more evidence in the Gospels than I have quoted. We need to read the Gospels regularly.

- **Some evidence from the Quran about Jesus**

The Quran teaches that:

- ✓ The Lord Jesus healed the sick and raised the dead (3:49 and 5:113);
- ✓ He was born of the Virgin Mary (3:45-47; 23:50; 10:16-22)
- ✓ He brought the Gospel to the Jewish people (3:49-51; 13:38)
- ✓ He was an apostle and a prophet of God (3:49; 6:85-90)
- ✓ He alone was supported by the Holy Spirit (3:45; 4:171)
- ✓ He is the Messiah (the Christ) (3:15; 4:157, 172)

In addition, the Quran repeatedly states that God had previously given revelations to the Jews and the Christians through the Torah (Tawrat in Arabic), the Psalms (Zabour in Arabic) and the Gospel (Injil in Arabic).

So the Quran gives testimony to God's previous revelations. Here are a few examples:

"He sent down the Law (of Moses) *and the Gospel* (of Jesus) *before this to guide mankind."*(3:3-4)

"Say, we believe in the revelation which has come down to us and which has come down to you." (29:46; 6:8-9; 2:136; 5:47; 7:157) So the Quran was sent down to confirm the Scriptures that God had given in the Old and New Testaments, *"This is the book which we have sent down, bringing blessings and confirming what came before."* (i.e. Old and New Testaments) (2:40-41, 89, 91 and 8:3)

God's revelations can never be changed or corrupted by men nor have previous revelations been abolished by God. So all Muslims are commanded to believe and obey the unchangeable revelations of the Bible. This confirms what the Lord Jesus said, ***"Until heaven and earth pass***

away, not an iota, not a dot will pass away from the Law until all is accomplished .... Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away". (Mt. 5:18 and 24:35).

[A hint: if you want to quote a text from the Quran use a translation from the Arabic to the English by a Muslim scholar such as The Translation of the Holy Quran (1946) by A. Yusuf Ali.]

- **The Crucifixion**

Then, on one day, the very worst happened and the Lord Jesus was crucified. The blank despair of His little band of disciples is obvious to anyone who has read the four Gospels. Then on the first Easter morning, some of the women went to the tomb and found it empty. This is something that no Christian theory has ever succeeded in explaining. More than this, the disciples met their risen Lord Jesus over a period of 40 days which they afterwards described with the words, ***"Many infallible proofs"*** (Acts 1:3). At last they fully realised that they could not explain this person as a mere man or even as a great prophet!

- **The Resurrection**

For evidence of the Resurrection see 1 Cor. 15:3-11 and from verse 12 Paul goes on to speak of the resurrection of us all from the dead.

Just before He died, the Lord Jesus said, ***"I am going to leave you"***. Naturally they were very upset. He went on to say, ***"It is to your advantage that I go away, because if I go away, I can send the Holy Spirit to you in a new way"***. (Jn. 14:25-27) [See also Jn. 16:5-15 and Acts 1:8] For an eyewitness account of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost see Acts 2:1-12. So the Lord Jesus comes back to us in a very real way by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds.

This is a huge advantage for all of us. When the Lord Jesus was on earth, He could only be at one place at one time and only a limited number of people could talk to Him at one time. But now, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, He can be present in the hearts of believers everywhere at the same time.

On the day of Pentecost, forty days after the Ascension, the Holy Spirit came and the disciples **experienced** Him – the ascended Lord Jesus – living by His Spirit in their hearts! They came to realise and experience that the one God has shown Himself to mankind in three different ways: **God the Father** in complete control of the physical universe, all the spiritual realms and all time, **the Lord Jesus** who lived as a man among men to show us very clearly what God is like so we could begin to understand Him and love Him and **the Holy Spirit** to empower us so we can live lives that please God. So we can see three revelations of the One True God.

A Muslim may ask why you call Jesus 'The Son of God'. This term causes a great deal of offence to Muslims! They think of a sura in the Quran that says, *"God is one. God is eternal. He neither begets nor is begotten and He has no equal whatever"*. Muslims assume that we call the Lord Jesus the 'Son of God' in a physical sense. We believe, just as Muslims believe, that the Lord Jesus was born from a virgin – that he had no human father.

But this is not the only reason we call the Lord Jesus the Son of God. We believe that He has always been the Son of God before the creation of the universe and long before He was born of Mary. The Lord Jesus was the 'Son' in the unity of the Godhead. So it is quite obvious that we don't use the term 'Son of God' in any physical sense. The word can only be used perfectly well in a metaphorical sense.

For example, if you were to write a book, you could say, "This is the son of my mind". So 'Son of God' in the Bible is only ever used in a metaphorical sense. The real meaning of the word is that the Lord Jesus was the Son of God in eternity long before He was born of the Virgin Mary.

Our Muslim friends are apt to think Christians are guilty of the unforgivable sin – associating someone else with God. They think we have taken a human being (a prophet like Jesus) and

made the terrible and fatal mistake of elevating him to the position of a God. This is far from the truth! The motion is not up but down! We have not taken even a very good human being and raised him up to be a God. The opposite is true. We worship God who, in His love for all mankind and His mercy, came down and became a man. God shows Himself in human form. This is why the Lord Jesus is not only called 'the Son of God' but also 'the Word of God'.

How do I know what you are thinking? It is by the words you use. How do we know what God thinks? It is by His Word. Your Muslim friends may ask why you use the term 'Son of God' if you don't mean it in any physical sense. Why not stop using the term? The answer is that the Lord Jesus Himself used it. He talked about the precedence in the Godhead as, "My Father". We don't give up the title just because people don't understand it!

When the Lord Jesus was here on earth, the Jews were longing for the coming of the 'Messiah' who would be their national leader and would give them victory over the Romans and the liberation of their own powerful independent nation. People often asked the Lord Jesus, "Are you the Messiah?" Usually He didn't give a direct answer. Why? He could not possibly say, "No" because He truly was the Messiah! But He couldn't say, "Yes", because that would imply to the Jewish people that He was the Messiah in the sense that they understood the term – a great military general like Julius Caesar. His usual answer was, "No, follow me". He gave a very accurate portrayal of the lifestyle of the job description of the Messiah of God. It was to save His people from the dreadful consequences of their sin once they knew Him as both Lord and Saviour. But most of them completely misunderstood Him. Some would listen to His teaching, think deeply about His nature and character and come to understand what the title, 'Son of God' really means because of their growing understanding of who He really is.

- **The Muslim understanding of death of the Lord Jesus**

How can God die? To us, as Christians, the death of the Lord Jesus on the Cross is the very centre of everything! It means more to us than anything else in the whole world – that the Lord Jesus not only lived a life to show us what God is really like but died to take all the terrible consequences of the sins of the whole world. What about that!!

There is a verse in the Quran which is commonly interpreted as denying that the Lord Jesus ever died at all! *"The Jews killed Jesus, the son of Mary but they did not kill him, neither did they crucify him, but the likeness was made of him and God called him up to himself. God is all-knowing and all-wise."*

How are we to explain this text? We don't need to because we are not Muslims! There are other verses in the Quran which, at first sight, seem to point another way. According to the above verse, the sequence is that the Lord Jesus lived, that He did not die and He was lifted up. But another verse in the Quran says, *"Peace be upon you the day I was born and the day I died and the day I will be raised on high."* It would seem that this is a clear sequence – born – died – lifted up. But it is not our job to interpret the Quran.

There has never been any serious doubt that the Crucifixion of the Lord Jesus is a historical fact. The Ahmadiya sect of Islam believes that the Lord Jesus was nailed to the Cross, but they don't follow the Biblical explanation of why it was necessary for the Lord Jesus to die and they don't believe He was resurrected from the dead.

- **How did Muhammad come to think that Christians believed the Trinity consisted of God the Father, His Son Jesus and the Virgin Mary? How did he come to deny or apparently deny the Crucifixion?**

There's been much speculation about this. Perhaps one of the heterodox Christian groups he met was a Gnostic group called the Barsadilians who believed that the "Eternal Spirit" came down on the man – i.e. an ordinary man – Jesus at the time of His baptism and this spirit left Him before He was crucified on the Cross.

But there is a simpler explanation than that. In the Gospels there is an incident where the Lord Jesus asked His disciples, ***"Who do men say that I am?"*** They responded, ***"Some say you are John the Baptist, some say you are Elijah, some say you are a prophet."*** Jesus asked them, ***"Who do you say I am?" Peter replied, "You are the Christ*** (the Messiah) ***the Son of the Living God"***. (Mt. 16:15-16) In reply the Lord Jesus said, ***"Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by My Father in heaven"***.

Immediately after this conversation Jesus began to teach them that He was about to die – Mt. 16:21. Peter's immediate response was, ***"Never, Lord, this will never happen to You!"*** In Peter's thinking this was not the job description of the Messiah. He was to conquer their enemies – not to suffer and die. The Lord Jesus said to Peter, ***"Get behind Me Satan! You do not have the mind of the things of God, but of the things of men"***. (Mt. 16:23)

Peter thought it was impossible that the Messiah God would die. Our Muslim friends have fallen into this same mistake. They think they are giving the prophet Jesus great honour because God couldn't possibly allow His chosen messenger – even if he was only a man – to suffer and die. God must somehow save him from his enemies.

Several decades ago an eminent Muslim became a believer in the Lord Jesus. He wrote a letter to his Muslim friends, not to argue that they were wrong, but just to explain to them why he had become a believer in the Lord Jesus. He said he had come to realise that in our life in this world we shouldn't aim for money or wealth or power etc. We should aim for love. He realised that love was always involved with other people. He came to see that it is a very inadequate concept of God to see Him as completely transcendent – a being who can't be made sad by man's disobedience or glad by his response. God is love and love is always in God. He always responds in love.

As we read the Gospels we see that God was and is infinitely involved in the world. He didn't just send messengers, prophets etc. He came Himself to win mankind back to Himself. This eminent Muslim said he was speaking about the Cross of the Lord Jesus. He loved this aspect of God more than any other attribute of God and so do we. God is love. Anything less is blasphemy!

God is love! It seems to me that our Muslim friends haven't really understood the love of God. They haven't really understood the holiness of God or the terrible sinfulness of sin. It is vital to help them see that even God Himself can't forgive sin except on a moral basis. God can't do anything contrary to His nature – His character. God is always utterly and completely consistent. This is the basis of the atonement. Whatever you may say about the death of the Lord Jesus never forget the subsequent resurrection!

- **What about the evidence for the Resurrection?**

It is overwhelmingly strong. Research this for yourself. You will need to present this verbally to your Muslim friends. The worldwide growth of the Christian faith is based on this stupendous fact – the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus. His Resurrection is unique in a most radical sense. He is the only person raised from the dead who never died again. Others in the Old Testament and the New Testament died and were miraculously raised to life from the dead. But in each case the person had to suffer the trauma of death all over again. But the Lord Jesus rose from the dead. He cannot die again! Death has no longer any mastery over Him. He submitted to death once on behalf of us and millions of others. He has triumphed over death for ever and countless millions of people in every section of society in all nations can testify to the great moral and spiritual dynamic that He brings to our lives.

2. <u>The Issue of Corrupted Scriptures and 'dictated' text</u>

We are aware of the general attitude of Muslims to the Christian Bible. A Common view is that the Old Testament was inspired by God. The Law was given to Moses. The Psalms were given to David etc. But the Jews corrupted the Old Testament and so what we have in our Bibles today

no longer corresponds to the divinely given prototype. They usually say that the same is true of the New Testament – Christians have changed it and it is no longer reliable. The basis of this is a verse in the Quran in which Muhammad complains that the Jews of his day "twisted their tongues" as they read the Scriptures. There is no evidence he thought they had changed the text of the Scriptures, but rather they pretended to read the actual words, but in fact changed them as they read in order to deceive him.

Since the discovery of the Qumran Scrolls (the Dead Sea Scrolls) we have a number of the actual manuscripts of the Old Testament that go back many centuries before Muhammad – back to before the birth of the Lord Jesus on the earth. We also have an abundance of documents from the New Testament that date before the time of Muhammad. So there is extraordinarily strong evidence for the text of the Bible.

- **The Form of the New Testament**

Another stumbling block for our Muslim friends is that if you read the Quran it is all in the form of God speaking directly to Muhammad. Each sentence/paragraph begins with "speak". This is even true when there is an account of a battle or something else. It is seen by Muslims as direct dictation from God to Muhammad who wrote it down.

When our Muslim friends turn to the New Testament they are very surprised! They find four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Then they find further books – The Acts of the Apostles and a whole series of letters written by the apostles to the early Christian churches located around the Eastern Mediterranean area. These deal with early Christian teaching. Finally there is The Book of Revelation speaking about the future.

For Muslims, the four books about the Lord Jesus (the Gospels) can't be the original Gospel that was somehow given to the Lord Jesus. It is clear to them that this original "gospel" has been lost and a false gospel substituted – i.e. the New Testament largely written by different followers of the Lord Jesus.

To a Muslim, the supreme revelation of God is in the Quran (in a book). They have a great reverence for Muhammad, but the supreme revelation is in a book. But this is not at all true in Christianity. The supreme revelation is in a person – the Lord Jesus, the Messiah. The book (the Bible) is very important. It must be both inspired by God and reliably transmitted to us. It is through this book that we get to know the person – God Himself. So the supreme revelation for Christians is not a book, but a person – the Lord Jesus – who showed us what God is really like and taught us how to live in obedience to His wishes for our individual lives.

So it is not a valid comparison to argue who is a better prophet the Lord Jesus or Muhammad. If the comparison is to be made, it should rather be between the Quran – the supreme revelation of God in Islam – and the Lord Jesus – the Living Word – the supreme revelation of God in the New Testament.

So who would be the equivalent of Muhammad in Christianity? It might be a mixture of John the Baptist and the apostle Paul. Both were inspired by the Holy Spirit to deliver God's message. But the message itself is always about the Lord Jesus. This is why we don't find a "book" given to the Lord Jesus for He **is** "the book"! "The book" tells us about the person and the person is the revelation of God.

When you are speaking to your Muslim friends, encourage them to read the New Testament carefully starting with Matthew. It is good if they can meet with you regularly to clear up any misunderstandings that may have occurred and so you can answer their questions.

Finally, you might invite them to a "house fellowship" so they can see how we worship together, pray and share with each other and learn how to be the Family of God together. As they read the Gospels encourage them to read aloud, if appropriate, the teachings of the Lord Jesus and learn

about His miracles and the sort of person He was – especially how He dealt with different individuals. He is still the same today.

Encourage your friends to get to know the Lord Jesus really well – to read about His trial and His death on the Cross and then about His Resurrection and Ascension back to heaven. You can share how to pray to Him and let the Holy Spirit work in their lives prompting them to do His will and stopping them from grieving Him when the Holy Spirit prompts them. Don't teach any set prayers but just show how to pray from the heart and to praise God for who He is and for all the good things He brings into our lives. As they learn to praise God from the heart and bring every need and concern to Him, they will begin to understand how deeply He loves them.