

Muhammad in Contemporary Christian Theological Reflection

David Marshall

There are at least two distinct contexts in which Christians can address the question of their response to Muhammad. One is the context of internal Christian theological discussion. Here Christians ask themselves how they should interpret Muhammad within a Christian frame of reference. Where does he fit within a Christian universe of meaning, a Christian view of God's purposes? In what sense, if any, can Christians regard him as a prophet? A feature of such internal Christian reflection is that it can allow considerable flexibility and diversity in thinking about prophecy. For Christianity prophecy is clearly important, but it is not as important as certain other concepts, notably incarnation. It is perhaps because prophecy is not at the very centre of Christian theological thinking that such flexibility and diversity in understanding it are possible.

The other context is that of Christian encounter with Muslims, whether in polemical debate or in eirenic dialogue. Christians are often asked by Muslims what they think of Muhammad and, sometimes, why they do not recognise him as a prophet, not least as Muslims recognize Jesus as a prophet. Within the wide field of Christian engagement with other faiths there is perhaps no other figure on whom Christians are more often invited to give their opinion. Within this context Christians will (or at least should) be acutely aware of the Islamic frame of reference within which Muslims use the word prophet. For Islam prophecy is a more central and also a more clearly defined concept than it is for Christianity.

Before attempting to reflect on the question of Christian theological response to Muhammad it is important to be aware of which of these distinct but related contexts we are operating in. Here I am primarily concerned with the first, the internal

Christian discussion. But Christians generally engage in this discussion because they have been prompted to do so by the other discussion, the conversation with Muslims. That context will therefore naturally also be in mind at various points.

The question often put by Muslims to Christians, as mentioned above, implies that there is an uncomplicated symmetry between the Islamic view of Jesus and the Christian view of Muhammad. Christian response often begins, rightly, by unpacking the question, drawing attention to various important distinctions which must be made before it can be tackled intelligently.¹ Here I will not attempt a full-scale analysis of the question, but it is important to note the very significant asymmetry between the Islamic view of Jesus and the Christian view of Muhammad. The “exercise” is different in each case. The Islamic view of Jesus is laid down in Islamic scripture and part of Islam’s self-understanding from the beginning. Jesus, as Muslims understand him, reinforces the truth of Islam. But it is quite different with the Christian view of Muhammad, because Muhammad lived 600 years after Christ and Christians cannot simply read off a canonical account of him from their scriptures. Furthermore, Muhammad’s message calls into question fundamental aspects of the faith Christians profess.

Here it is worth pondering the analogy between Christian views of Muhammad and Jewish views of Jesus.² In both cases, in pre-modern times these views were almost uniformly negative and still today Jews and Christians tend to react cautiously to the figure in whom the true fulfilment of their faith is said to be achieved. Jews and Christians have generally felt that to look sympathetically at, respectively, Jesus and Muhammad is to come uncomfortably near to acknowledging the truth of the faith that claims to correct and supersede their own. In modern times,

¹ For example, Jacques Jomier, *How to Understand Islam* (London: SCM, 1989), 140-148.

² John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 16.

however, there have been those who have articulated more positive Jewish accounts of Jesus and more positive Christian accounts of Muhammad. In both cases the exercise is complex and sometimes controversial.³

Pre-modern responses

Before turning to some examples of modern Christian responses to Muhammad, which will be the main focus of this essay, we should first briefly consider some examples from the pre-modern period. We need to distinguish between Christians living in the Islamic world, who generally had some knowledge of Islamic teaching, and those outside it, who were usually very ignorant about Islam. Among Christians in the latter category it was widely believed that Muslims were idolaters and that they worshipped Muhammad; Muhammad's claims to prophecy were sometimes explained away in terms of epilepsy; much emphasis was placed on his perceived sensuality and violence; there were even stories that Muhammad was "a Roman cardinal or cleric, frustrated in his ambition, who perverted his own converts to spite the Roman Church".⁴

Christians living under Islamic rule were generally better informed, but their view of Muhammad was not necessarily more positive. John of Damascus, for example, described Muhammad as a "false prophet".⁵ A very negative Christian assessment of Muhammad, which was to prove influential in later Christian polemics, is preserved in the 9th century correspondence between the Muslim al-Hashimi and the Christian al-Kindi, who robustly rejects Muhammad's claims to prophethood on

³ On Jewish views of Jesus, see Beatrice Bruteau (ed.), *Jesus through Jewish Eyes: Rabbis and Scholars Engage an Ancient Brother in a New Conversation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001).

⁴ Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: the Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1960), 83. Tolan gives many examples of Western Christian views of Muhammad in *Saracens*: e.g. Peter the Venerable (xxi), Guibert de Nogent (135-147), Pope Innocent III (194).

⁵ Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites"* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 132-133; Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 38-41.

various grounds, including his attitudes to violence and to women. “Al-Kindi”, significantly, was writing under the veil of anonymity; Christians under Islamic rule were in general much more circumspect in what they said about Islam.⁶

There is, however, one famous case of an Eastern Christian leader appearing to give a strikingly positive account of Muhammad. In the course of a dialogue in 8th century Baghdad between Patriarch Timothy I and the Muslim ruler, the Caliph al-Mahdi, Timothy was asked for his view of Muhammad and commented that Muhammad “walked in the path of the prophets”. In support of this assertion he mentions Muhammad’s preaching against idolatry, his monotheism, and his ethical teaching; he also recognises parallels between Muhammad and biblical figures such as Moses.⁷ From the early period of Muslim-Christian encounter, this is as positive a Christian comment on Muhammad as we will find, but the episode is elusive and it is hard to be sure how to interpret Timothy’s words confidently. He was speaking to the ruler “in whose hands rested his own fate and that of his community”.⁸ Was he therefore perhaps bowing to pressure and saying more than he really believed? But even if Timothy would have said exactly the same in private discussion with fellow Christians, we note the carefully chosen words: not “Muhammad was a prophet” (for then Timothy could have been said to have made the Muslim confession of faith), but rather he “walked in the path of the prophets...” It is an interesting but elusive episode.

⁶ Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Encounters & Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History* vol. I (Rome: PISAI, 2000), 53-58; Goddard, *History*, 53-54; Tolan, *Saracens*, 60-64.

⁷ “The Dialogue of Patriarch Timothy I with Caliph Mahdi” in N. A. Newman (ed.), *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries (632-900 A.D.) Translations with Commentary* (Hatfield, Pennsylvania: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993), 163-267. For discussion of Muhammad see 218-219.

⁸ Daniel Madigan SJ, “Jesus and Muhammad: the Sufficiency of Prophecy” in Michael Ipgrave (ed.) *Bearing the Word: Prophecy in Biblical and Qur’ānic Perspective* (London: Church House Publishing, 2005), 93.

Timothy's response points to the difficulty posed to Christians by the specific question of response to Muhammad rather than the more general question of response to Islam.⁹ Following John of Damascus, many, perhaps most, Christians, have instinctively placed Muhammad in the category of the "false prophet"; some have spoken of him as "the anti-Christ".¹⁰ The logic of this approach seems simple and irrefutable. If Muhammad's teaching, claimed as divine revelation, denies core truths of the Christian Gospel, how can Christians place him in any other, more positive, category?

Modern responses

This apparently straightforward argument can claim some grounding in early Christian tradition and has persisted over the centuries. Leaping ahead a millennium from the examples cited so far, we can point to the deployment of similar polemic by Christian missionaries in 19th century British India. A notable exponent of this approach was Karl Gottlieb Pfander, who wrote influential books seeking to discredit Muhammad's claims to be a true prophet and engaged in public debates with Muslim scholars, with varying degrees of success.¹¹ The name of Pfander is honoured by some Evangelical Christians today who produce "Pfander films" which tackle questions disputed between Christians and Muslims.¹² Polemical debate of this kind is carried out via the Internet, in universities and elsewhere. With reference specifically to Muhammad, a modern twist to this kind of debate is that some Christian polemicists draw on recent Western scholarship on Islamic origins which calls into

⁹ See Madigan, "Jesus and Muhammad", 90, where he calls the question of Muhammad "without doubt the most avoided question in Muslim-Christian relations", noting that while the documents of Vatican II found plenty to praise in Muslims and their faith they make no mention of Muhammad himself.

¹⁰ For example, see Goddard, *History*, 81-4, on the 9th century martyrs of Cordoba.

¹¹ See Avril Ann Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India* (Richmond: Curzon, 1993).

¹² <http://www.youtube.com/user/PfanderFilms>

question the traditional Muslim account of the historical Muhammad.¹³ We should, however, note the diversity of approaches to Islam among contemporary Evangelicals, many of whom, while concerned to promote Christian witness to Muslims, would ask whether the polemical approach has produced any good fruit, whether it destroys rather than builds bridges between Christians and Muslims, and whether it can only be seen in the present climate as part of a wider Western attack on the Islamic world.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it is a safe generalization to suggest that in the modern world the tradition of Christian polemical approaches to Islam is largely carried on by Evangelicals.¹⁵

In contrast to the polemical tradition, over the last 200 years many Christian scholars of different traditions have studied Muhammad's life and teaching and have come to at least a partial respect for him. They have felt that they cannot put Muhammad in a totally negative category and yet equally they cannot subscribe to the Islamic account of Muhammad as the final prophet, with Jesus regarded as his forerunner. For such Christians, in contrast to those who dismiss Muhammad outright, it is a difficult exercise to formulate a response which remains authentically Christian and yet recognises all that can be affirmed in Muhammad.

¹³ As these developments in recent scholarship on the origins of Islam have not featured significantly in the contemporary Christian theological assessments of Muhammad explored in this essay, they are not discussed further here. For more on this question, see the contribution by Daniel Madigan SJ to this collection of Campion Hall essays, "Revisionist Historiography and Christian Attitudes towards Muhammad".

¹⁴ For example, see Colin Chapman, *Cross and Crescent*, new edition (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007), 397-9.

¹⁵ Since Vatican II, official Roman Catholic teaching has called its members to turn away from the polemics of the past (*Nostra Aetate*, 3) and the emphasis of the World Council of Churches is on dialogue. For this essay it has not been possible to establish whether polemical approaches are to be found in any contemporary Orthodox writing on Islam. More widely, on Orthodox approaches to Islam, Robert Caspar commented in 1987 on the scarcity of Orthodox thought on Islam, mentioning Olivier Clément and Georges Khodr as exceptions to this general tendency (*Traité de Théologie Musulmane*: vol. 1 (Rome: PISAI, 1987), 91). Ten years later Kate Zebiri observed: "The Orthodox study of Islam is not at present highly developed" (*Muslims and Christians Face to Face* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 185). However, note should be taken of Andrew Sharp's recent publication *Orthodox Christians and Islam in the Postmodern Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

One feature which is typical of these more positive approaches to Muhammad is to accept his sincerity. Eschewing mediaeval Christian ideas of Muhammad as an imposter, a conscious deceiver (similar to pre-modern Jewish views of Jesus), many modern Christian scholars have warmed especially to Muhammad in the earlier, Meccan, phase of his career, when he is powerless, armed only with the word, and impressively steadfast under persecution as he proclaims the one true God and his just demands in the face of crude polytheism and various social ills. This does not seem to be someone who has consciously devised a message for his own benefit; on the contrary, he is suffering for the truth. Whatever one might make of some aspects of Muhammad's message, most Christian interpreters now accept that he sincerely believed he was sent by God.¹⁶ But it should also be acknowledged that even for more sympathetic Christians there are aspects of Muhammad's later, Medinan, phase (during which he and his followers take up arms for the cause of Islam) which are harder to accommodate appreciatively. Episodes recorded in the traditional Islamic sources which Christians tend to find most difficult include the assassination of poets who satirized Muhammad and the punishment of the Banu Qurayza, a hostile Jewish tribe.¹⁷ It is also at Medina that Muhammad's criticism of Christianity becomes much sharper.

The rest of this essay offers some examples of relatively recent Christian writing on Muhammad from a broadly sympathetic perspective, and certainly not in the polemical tradition mentioned earlier. No attempt is made to give a systematic or

¹⁶ It is notable that even within the examples of modern "Protestant Missionary Literature on Islam" surveyed by Zebiri, acceptance of Muhammad's sincerity is widespread (*Muslims and Christians Face to Face*, 109; also see 196-197).

¹⁷ Jonathan A. C. Brown sets the assassination of satirists in context: satirical poetry was "a political weapon. In Arabia, poets were the propagandists in times of conflict." (*Muhammad: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 2011), 41.) For a response to critical comment on the treatment of the Banu Qurayza, see Reza Aslan, *No god but God* (London: Arrow Books, 2006), 91-94.

comprehensive survey of all modern Christian writing on Muhammad; the aim, rather, is to draw out some of the key theological issues involved.¹⁸

Daniel Madigan SJ

In a lecture entitled “Jesus and Muhammad: the Sufficiency of Prophecy”, given at a 2004 seminar of Christian and Muslim scholars convened by Archbishop Rowan Williams, Daniel Madigan SJ provides a useful starting-point for exploring this challenging question. Madigan does not present a neatly packaged answer to the question of how Christians should understand Muhammad, but along with some helpful clarifications he leads us to see that the question is more complex than we perhaps think at first. He reminds us that we must ask which Muhammad we are talking about. Muslim accounts of Muhammad vary greatly, from the emphasis in much of the traditional biographical literature on his military achievements to portrayals of him as a rationalist reformer, a consummate philosopher or, in some mystical traditions, as the primordial light.¹⁹ Christians need to bear in mind that Muhammad can mean all these things and more to different Muslims.

Madigan also draws out helpfully the different kinds of claims that Muslims and Christians make about the presence of God’s Word in Muhammad and Jesus. He emphasizes that for Christians “God chose what we might call body-language – the

¹⁸ A helpful survey of some leading twentieth century Christian writers on Muhammad is given by David Kerr in “‘He Walked in the Path of the Prophets’: Toward Christian Theological Recognition of the Prophethood of Muhammad” in Y. Y. Haddad and W. Z. Haddad (eds), *Christian-Muslim Encounters* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), 426-446. The main scholars discussed by Kerr are Louis Massignon, Charles Ledit, Michel Hayek, George Khodr, Kenneth Cragg, Hans Küng and Montgomery Watt. For a recent survey of some (mainly German) contemporary Roman Catholic approaches to Muhammad see Anja Middelbeck-Varwick, “Muhammad, der Prophet nach Jesus? Katholisch-theologische Bewertungen im Ausgang des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils,” *CIBEDO-Beiträge* 2/2010, 56-63. The writers selected for discussion by Middelbeck-Varwick are Hans Zirker, Gerhard Gäde, Hans Küng, Christian W. Troll SJ, Samir Khalil Samir SJ and Wolfgang Klausnitzer. There is also much relevant material on approaches to Muhammad in Christian W. Troll SJ, “Changing Catholic Views of Islam” in Jacques Waardenburg, *Islam and Christianity: Mutual Perceptions since the Mid-20th Century* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 19-77). Troll discusses Jean-Muhammad Abd-el-Jalil, Youakim Moubarac, Giulio Bassetti-Sani, Jacques Jomier, Robert Caspar, Hans Küng, Adolfo González Montes, Hans Zirker and Henri Sanson.

¹⁹ Madigan, “Jesus and Muhammad”, 91, 94-5.

language of embodied human living and dying – to express the Word in Jesus”, while Muslims make no such claim about Muhammad; for Muslims Muhammad is not the Word made flesh but the bearer of the Word (as Mary is for Christians). This is a fundamental point. It is easy to assume that there is a clear parallel between, on the one hand, Muhammad and the Qur’ān in Islam, and on the other, Jesus and the Bible in Christianity. But Muhammad and Jesus do not have parallel functions within the two faiths and the closer theological parallel is in fact between Jesus and the Qur’ān, both representing within this world the revelation of God’s eternal, uncreated Word. A firm grasp of this point will prevent Christian responses to Muhammad from making the fundamental category mistake of assuming that he “is being proposed as a replacement saviour”.²⁰

Another important question raised by Madigan is what challenge there is to Christians in Muhammad’s preaching. He warns against treating Muhammad’s preaching as “superfluous”; rather, it is “invaluable” for Christians, offering a “salutary critique of Christian faith and behavior” which can lead us to “a fuller understanding of our faith”.²¹ Muhammad’s critique of Christianity is salutary (Madigan does not say “valid”) because it highlights various historical failures in the communication of the Christian message. It is possible that Muhammad encountered forms of Christianity that were in effect tritheistic rather than Trinitarian; his uncompromisingly monotheistic approach therefore rejects all language of threeness totally. Can Christians see in that message a continuing challenge to ask themselves whether they are being trinitarianly monotheist rather than actually tritheist; a challenge to formulate a convincing christological proclamation; to reflect on how we understand the relationship between revelation and scripture? Madigan suggests that

²⁰ Ibid., 95.

²¹ Ibid., 96.

rather than (or at least as well as) approaching Muhammad asking only into what theological category they can place him, Christians might instead (or also) ask themselves what he has to say to them.

Hans Küng

Madigan's thoughtful and problematizing approach may well leave us with more questions than answers. In contrast, Hans Küng is forthright and categorical in what he has to say about Muhammad. In response to the question "Can Muhammad be considered a prophet by Christians?" Küng gives a clear and emphatic answer: yes, he can, and he should be. He issues the challenge to his fellow-Christians: "isn't it ... simply a dogmatic prejudice for Christians to recognize Amos and Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah and the extremely violent Elijah as prophets, but not Muhammad?"²²

For our purposes it is most important to grasp the theological undergirding of Küng's position and in particular an argument which he develops about christology. There is a non-negotiable authority for traditional Christianity in the christology which emerged from the period of the great Councils of the 4th and 5th centuries and was expressed in the Nicene Creed and Chalcedonian Definition. These teach that in Jesus Christ the eternal Son or Word of God (the second person of the Trinity) became human. Islam, of course, rejects this belief, which is why traditionally Christians have not felt able to call Muhammad a prophet. So how does Küng get round this as a Christian theologian? His readiness to call Muhammad a prophet is related to his view of the emergence of early Christian doctrine. For Küng, while the Creeds have a certain validity, it is important to emphasize that they represent the convictions not of all early Christians but rather of the victors in the theological debates of the early Christian centuries. These victors, such as Athanasius, triumphed

²² Hans Küng, *Islam: Past, Present and Future* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 123.

over other early Christian understandings of Christ and God which thus came to be seen as heresies and were largely buried under the rubble of ecclesiastical history. While we now tend to read that early Christian history through the biased perspective of the doctrinal conquerors (now enshrined in the Creeds), Küng would encourage us to take a much more positive view of the early Christian heresies than has been the norm.

How does all this relate to Islam and Muhammad? Some of the early Christian heresies were *Jewish* Christian understandings of Jesus which saw in him not the incarnation of the Word of God but a Spirit-filled Messiah. Building on the work of other scholars, Küng emphasizes the similarities between this low Christology held by some early Jewish Christians and the view of Jesus in the Qur'ān. Thus Muhammad brings to light again, in the 7th century, an early Christian tradition which came to be seen as heretical and largely disappeared, but which Küng believes has every right to be considered a valid, authentically Christian view of Jesus. Küng writes: "Islam reminds Christians of their own Jewish Christian past". Rather than rejecting Muhammad's view of Jesus as deficient (judged by the Creeds), Christians should welcome it as a way of reconnecting with early Jewish forms of Christianity. So we should "stop thinking in terms of alternatives, of Jesus *or* Muḥammad" and "think instead in terms of synthesis, of Jesus *and* Muḥammad. Muḥammad himself acts as a witness to Jesus, not to a Jesus as Hellenistic Gentile Christians could have viewed him, but to a Jesus as viewed by his first disciples, who were Jews like Jesus himself."²³

In terms of research on the historical background of Islam, these observations are very interesting and may well be plausible. However, in terms of Christian

²³ Hans Küng, "Christianity and World Religions: The Dialogue with Islam as One Model," *The Muslim World* 77 (1987), 91, 93; see also Küng, *Islam*, 494-497.

theology some important questions are not addressed adequately. For example, it is surprising that Küng does not mention an obvious response to his comparison of Muhammad and biblical figures such as Elijah. Yes, indeed, Elijah takes up the sword in the cause of God but in Christian perspective he is part of a long and varied history of revelation that is fulfilled in the non-violent Messiah Jesus.²⁴ “The use of force in the name of God by earlier prophets is thus relativized and stripped of any normative or exemplary significance for Christian thinking and practice.”²⁵ Christians can affirm Elijah as a prophet (even along with his violence) because he is part of a process that looks ahead to Christ; in contrast, it raises fundamental questions about the Christian understanding of sacred history to affirm as a prophet one such as Muhammad who claims that this history is fulfilled not in Jesus but in himself, and in whom the use of the sword which had been relativized by the story of Jesus is again made normative in prophetic practice. As we shall see later, when we look at Kenneth Cragg, it may be necessary to wrestle afresh with the Christian viewpoint just outlined, which perhaps involves too unbending an understanding of the chronology of sacred history, and it is also important to understand Muhammad’s military conflicts in context. The point here, however, is that whereas Cragg acknowledges this unavoidable theological problem and wrestles with it, Küng appears simply to ignore it.

Küng is also weak in his treatment of the cross. He acknowledges that this is an area of real difference between the two faiths: Islam denies both the historical fact of Jesus’ death and also the human need for redemption; there is no need for the cross in Islamic perspective. Küng does also recognise, helpfully, that this leads to different

²⁴ Commenting on my phrase “the non-violent Messiah”, a Muslim colleague writes: “Of course this is true, but not in an absolute sense. Certainly the money changers in the temple did not experience Jesus as ‘non-violent’ in the sense we usually use the term in contemporary English.” This raises an interesting point deserving further discussion.

²⁵ Christian W. Troll SJ, *Dialogue and Difference: Clarity in Christian-Muslim Relations* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2009), 124, n. 6.

bearings in the two faiths towards issues of theodicy and God's relationship to suffering.²⁶ But he does not adequately address questions about salvation which necessarily arise here. It is one thing to claim that Muhammad is a prophet because he bears witness to a low christology held by some early Christians; but it would be much less convincing to suggest that any version of Christian theology (apart from an extreme Docetism) can regard Muhammad as a prophetic witness to a Jesus who never died and is in no sense a saviour. Küng does not address this difficulty. One can only assume, drawing on his wider approach, that if pressed on this point he would say that to be a prophet is not to be infallible and that regarding the cross Muhammad was wrong both factually and theologically, but that this should not prevent him being considered a prophet and a valuable witness to Jesus. This would, incidentally, be territory into which no Muslims could follow Küng. To make that observation is not to disallow his robust contribution to the internal Christian discussion, but it is to note that while his proposals, which appear so positive about Muhammad, may at first sight seem very promising for the purposes of dialogue with Muslims, that does not in fact necessarily follow.

More generally, I noted earlier how Küng's positive account of Muhammad as a prophet depends on a downplaying of Nicene-Chalcedonian orthodoxy. It also depends on a willingness to relativize the higher christology of parts of the New Testament, as in his passing comment, while discussing the relationship between Christianity and Islam, that the theology of John's Gospel is "profound but arbitrary".²⁷ A discussion of the proper relationship of contemporary Christian theological reflection on Islam to scripture and the Creeds is beyond the scope of this essay, but it seems clear that to most Christians Küng's attitude to both scripture and

²⁶ Küng, *Islam*, 497-499.

²⁷ Küng, *Islam*, 178.

the Creeds simply disqualify him as a reliable guide in the challenging terrain of theological response to Islam generally and Muhammad specifically. If a positive view of Muhammad is to be developed, it will have to be on other grounds than those proposed by Küng and it may indeed therefore need to be more modestly, more cautiously, formulated.

Jacques Jomier OP and Christian Troll SJ

Brief mention can be made here of two contemporary Roman Catholic scholars of Islam, Jacques Jomier OP and Christian Troll SJ, whose thinking follows broadly similar lines and who have both proposed more cautiously positive approaches to Muhammad than Küng.²⁸ Whereas for Küng the logic of the positive statements made about Islam at Vatican II is that Muhammad should be recognized by Christians as a prophet, for Jomier and Troll fidelity to Vatican II's teaching is demonstrated in the avoidance of all polemic and the respectful recognition of Muhammad's political and religious achievements. They both argue that it is, however, impossible to call Muhammad a prophet with Christian integrity as his message denies fundamental Christian convictions. They also emphasize that attempts by Christians to define Muhammad as a prophet in some sense less than what the concept means for Muslims tend to leave Muslims unimpressed and do not promote genuine dialogue, which should never seek to dissolve genuine differences.²⁹ Troll ends a discussion of Muhammad in Christian perspective with the following passage, which indicates clearly how his approach differs from Küng's:

In conclusion, from a Christian theological perspective Muhammad can certainly be acknowledged as an outstanding religio-political founder figure. It

²⁸ Troll suggests that "from among the non-official, individual Catholic views of Islam those of Jacques Jomier would meet with broad assent among educated Catholics" ("Changing Catholic Views of Islam", 71).

²⁹ Troll, *Dialogue and Difference*, 119-120.

is due to Muhammad, his submission to God and his struggle to bring the Muslim *umma* into being, that there are now countless Muslims around the world who “along with us adore the one and merciful God” (LG 16) and who have been shaped by the doctrines and values on which “the Church looks with esteem” (NA 3). In a theological sense, however, Christians cannot recognize Muhammad as a prophet without thereby denying their own faith. In an attitude of critical openness, however, they certainly can and should give serious consideration to the witness of Muhammad’s life and teaching and the challenges these pose to them. To do so is indeed to bear witness with both confidence and humility to the universal and all-embracing lordship of Jesus, “the heir of all things, through whom [God] also created the worlds” (Hebrews 1.2).³⁰

Kenneth Cragg

The final example of Christian reflection on Muhammad to be discussed here is Kenneth Cragg’s study *Muhammad and the Christian*, a complex and wide-ranging exploration of the theological issues. Cragg, an Anglican bishop, speaks of his “positive, critical position”: he seeks to develop as sympathetic a Christian reading of Muhammad and his achievement as possible, but is also quite clear about the points at which the Christian must register disquiet about Muhammad.³¹

An indication of how sympathetic Cragg’s approach is that it is widely assumed that he calls on Christians to recognize Muhammad as a prophet.³² One can

³⁰ Troll, *Dialogue and Difference*, 128. See also Jomier, *How to Understand Islam*, 140-148. The same point that Christians cannot recognise Muhammad as a prophet without denying their own faith is made by Samir Khalil Samir SJ (Middelbeck-Varwick, “Muhammad, der Prophet nach Jesus?”, 60-61).

³¹ Kenneth Cragg, *Muhammad and the Christian: a Question of Response* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984), 141.

³² This interpretation of Cragg is expressed by Kerr (“He Walked in the Path of the Prophets”, 436) and by Keith Ward (“Muhammad from a Christian perspective” in Norman Solomon, Richard Harries and Tim Winter (eds), *Abraham’s Children* (London: T. and T. Clark, 2005), 124-131).

see why: Cragg challenges a number of negative Christian positions about Muhammad and at points refers to the “prophetic” in relation to Muhammad in ways that could be interpreted either as an acknowledgement of Muhammad’s prophetic status or as referring to his status within Islam. There is however, no point at which Cragg unequivocally affirms that Christians can and should regard Muhammad as a prophet. Perhaps he deliberately avoids addressing this question head on, in order to come more obliquely – and maybe more fruitfully – at a number of related issues.

An example of Cragg’s sympathetic engagement with Muhammad is the way he challenges the Christian tendency to reject Muhammad on the grounds of chronology, an issue already noted above. Cragg argues that Christian response should take account of place as well as time and so seek to appreciate Muhammad’s achievement in its context in pagan Arabia: “In cultic terms the parallel would be closer to the Samaria of Elijah than with the Alexandria of Athanasius or the Jerusalem of Jesus.” This is a stimulating challenge to the Christian to reflect on biblical analogies to Muhammad’s achievement, though it is typical of Cragg that he immediately concedes the chief difficulty with this proposal, namely the Qur’ān’s “explicit controversy against crucial Christian understandings of Jesus”, which limits the applicability of the Elijah-Muhammad parallel. Even so, Cragg urges the Christian to persist with a “positive will” towards sympathetic understanding of Muhammad in his context.³³

A further example of this will to understanding comes in Cragg’s discussion of the “political equation” in the ministry of Muhammad. Although, as we shall see, this is ultimately the area of Cragg’s most serious reservations about Muhammad, he does insist that Christians should “be honestly alert to the Meccan situation and the power

³³ Cragg, *Muhammad*, 92-3.

dimension as everywhere inescapable”.³⁴ Simply stated, Muhammad’s mission could only succeed through the use of force, and Cragg does not allow simplistic evasion of this point. He goes so far as to raise the question whether Christianity and Islam offer a kind of dual witness, Islam witnessing to power “as a ‘friend’ that cannot be dismissed”, while Gethsemane and the New Testament witness to power as “an ‘enemy’ who must always be distrusted”.³⁵

That interesting possibility, however, is not where Cragg’s main emphasis falls. It is significant that in the book’s concluding sentence he refers to Christian “regret” about “the Caesar in Muhammad”.³⁶ This reflects his wider concern that Islam, following Muhammad’s example, has a confidence in “political religion” which the Christian faith cannot share; there is here a profound contrast between different expectations as to what politics can achieve in setting the human situation to rights.

Cragg’s discussion of this area leads into reflections on the fundamental account in the two faiths of the human condition and of God’s response to it. For Islam, the divine guidance offered in the prophetic message that came through Muhammad is implemented as law; this meets the human situation exactly and redemption is neither needed nor offered. For the Christian faith, in contrast, there is an intractable quality to the human predicament, our fallenness, which prophetic guidance, implemented through law, cannot cure. Ultimately, we need redemption, which is what is given in Jesus, who is “more than a prophet”. So we come to the question of suffering in the achieving of God’s purposes. Muhammad certainly experiences suffering in the path of obedience to God but that suffering is not in itself

³⁴ Ibid., 31.

³⁵ Ibid., 49-50.

³⁶ Ibid., 159. Balancing this note of reserve, the same sentence speaks of Christian acknowledgment of Muhammad, though it is not stated what Christians should acknowledge Muhammad as.

redemptive. Muhammad's achievement is to persevere through his time of suffering and rejection until, becoming more powerful and triumphing over his enemies, he is finally able to achieve manifest success in this world. Suffering is incidental to his achievement, not central to it. This is in contrast to the Christian celebration of the redemptive power of the suffering of Christ; there is a "strange logic" at the heart of the Gospel encapsulated in the words "I will send to them my Son, my beloved".³⁷

Underlying these observations is Cragg's sense of two contrasting understandings of the relationship of God to suffering. Whereas for the Qur'ān "there can be no place for suffering in deity", Cragg sees the Christian Gospel as witnessing to divine vulnerability. The love that impels Christ to redemptive suffering points us to "the travail of God" himself, a travail which Cragg stresses is not imposed from beyond God (for this would call into question the ultimacy of God) but which rather arises "*within* his nature".³⁸

Cragg has written so extensively on Islam that it is natural that his work has often been criticized, by both Muslims and Christians.³⁹ A recent critique is offered by the Muslim scholar Tim Winter in the course of a stimulating article which challenges the tendency among Christians and Muslims to engage in oversimplified contrasts between the two faiths.⁴⁰ Winter suggests that Cragg's "gloomy diagnosis of an 'irreducible disparity'" is a case in point.⁴¹ Winter may be right that in one section of *Muhammad and the Christian* Cragg reduces the Islamic understanding of prophecy to education and command, but it should be noted that Cragg also insists early in the book that there is "not only the Muḥammad of the *Sīrah*" but also the

³⁷ Ibid., 125-9.

³⁸ Ibid., 137-8 (italics original).

³⁹ See Christopher Lamb, *The Call to Retrieval: Kenneth Cragg's Christian Vocation to Islam* (London: Grey Seal, 1997), 123-131. In his contribution to this collection of essays from the Campion Hall seminars, Richard Sudworth also touches on Muslim criticisms of Cragg.

⁴⁰ Tim Winter, "Jesus and Muḥammad: New Convergences," *The Muslim World* 99 (2009), 21-38.

⁴¹ Ibid., 31.

Muhammad of the Sufi tradition (to which he dedicates a whole chapter).⁴² However, my intention is not to defend every aspect of Cragg's approach in *Muhammad and the Christian*, but rather to uphold as exemplary for Christian response to Islam the general style of this work. What is therefore of most concern here is Winter's implication that in his account of the differences between Jesus and Muhammad Cragg is drawing on a theology which is not just unacceptable to Muslims but should also be regarded with suspicion by Christians.⁴³ It is, however, far from clear that Cragg holds the view of the Law ascribed to him by Winter, and that Cragg's approach is a "Marcionite" (or even "sub-Marcionite") "polemic against 'Semitism'"⁴⁴.

Winter's implication that Cragg's approach is disreputable (even in Christian terms) and therefore unpromising for dialogue with Muslims is significant, in view both of the leading role Winter has played in dialogue with Christians and also of the very high regard in which Cragg's work is held by Christians across a broad ecclesiastical and theological spectrum.⁴⁵ Of course this does not raise him above the criticism of either Muslims or Christians, but it does indicate that he is speaking from somewhere near the heart of the Christian tradition and that his articulation of what is central to the Christian faith in encounter with Islam commands widespread confidence among Christians. For Muslims to query Cragg's account of Islam is an

⁴² Ibid., 35 n. 7; Cragg, *Muhammad and the Christian*, 4.

⁴³ It is significant that Winter's brief references to Küng's work are much more positive: "New Convergences," 24, 26.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 35, n. 7, n. 8; 23. Winter refers to page 77 of Cragg's work *Semitism* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005) as an illustration of his "understanding of the supersession of the Law". However, Cragg is here careful to say that Paul was "not against the law, only against the notion that law was all we needed. ... No 'antinomian' would have struggled so earnestly for the moral probity and careful discipline of 'all the churches'." It seems exaggerated to describe this position as "Marcionite".

⁴⁵ Witness the wide range of contributors to *A Faithful Presence: Essays for Kenneth Cragg*, edited by David Thomas with Clare Amos (London: Melisende, 2003). Archbishop Rowan Williams provided an introductory tribute to this volume and also a foreword to a recent work by Cragg which he describes as "a fitting crown to decades of exceptional theological work" (Kenneth Cragg, *The Order of the Wounded Hands* (London: Melisende, 2006), viii).

entirely appropriate part of dialogue. Muslims are also perfectly entitled to raise questions about his Christian theology, but it should be emphasized that he is not an unrepresentative maverick.

Conclusion

After a brief survey of the views of Muhammad held by pre-modern Christians, this essay has mainly focused on the modern era. While it has not been my aim to create a detailed typology of modern Christian approaches to Muhammad, we can in conclusion note the spectrum discussed here, from a continuing polemical tradition among some Evangelical Christians through to Kūng's insistence that Christians should recognize Muhammad as a prophet and Kūng's related downplaying of aspects of orthodox Christian doctrine. Between these extremes we have considered the approaches of Madigan, Jomier, Troll and Cragg. These scholars of Islam all reject the polemics of the past and in various ways encourage their fellow Christians to explore as sympathetic and appreciative an engagement with Muhammad as is compatible with an authentically Christian faith, with Madigan in particular calling Christians to be open to what they might learn from the message of Muhammad. There is, as was noted earlier, a complexity in approaches such as these which seek to articulate an appreciative Christian view of one who bears a message that calls into question fundamental Christian convictions.

Among the approaches considered here those of Kūng and Cragg probably have the widest influence. While there is some overlap between them – notably a concern to challenge entrenched negative attitudes among Christians – there are also significant differences. The fundamental difference seems to be that whereas, in his response to Muhammad, Kūng largely marginalizes key aspects of traditional Christian belief – the incarnation and the cross and resurrection – Cragg does not, but

allows these themes a full airing. As a result, one senses with Cragg a response that comes out of the heart of the Christian faith, a response fundamentally shaped by central Christian convictions. In contrast, the driving force behind Küng's work appears to be the application of historical critical method; this applies, of course, to Christianity as much as to Islam and he wants to see both faiths re-interpreted through this process. There is doubtless much for Christians to learn from both approaches, but it is unquestionable that Cragg has articulated a theological response from the heart of the Christian tradition in a way that Küng simply has not attempted to do.

Whatever valid criticisms may be made of aspects of Cragg's work, my conclusion is that it continues to hold out an exemplary style of Christian theological engagement with Islam. It therefore seems inevitable that Christian responses to Muhammad which, like Cragg's, take their stand on orthodox convictions about God in Christ, and Christ crucified and risen for our salvation, will express significant reservations. Cragg's great achievement is the example he sets his fellow-Christians of how not to allow these reservations about Muhammad to prevent as sympathetic and intelligent an engagement with him as possible. The difficult questions raised in the process are ones which authentic dialogue cannot avoid and with which Muslims and Christians must learn to live.