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“The whole house of Islam, and we Christians with them...”

**An interview with “the Last Orientalist”
by Bashir Maan & Alastair McIntosh**

The Reverend Professor William Montgomery Watt has written over 30 books including Islamic Political Thought (1968) and Muslim-Christian Encounters: Perceptions and Misconceptions (1991). He has been a member of the Iona Community since 1960 and is its oldest living member. Amongst Islamic scholars he has been held in an esteem described as “most reverential.” The Muslim press have called him “the Last Orientalist.” This interview was conducted in 1999, his ninetieth year, at his home in Dalkeith. With Professor Watt’s approval and careful agreement of the final text, it uses both spoken material and statements drawn from some of his most important articles of recent years. It is, in a sense, a distillation of his life’s work.

Dr Bashir Maan is Scottish Representative on the Executive of the Muslim Council of Great Britain, was for 8 years chair of the Glasgow Central Mosque Committee and, as an elected Glasgow city councillor, chairs the Strathclyde Joint Police Board - Britain’s second-largest police force.

Alastair McIntosh’s work on “combating Islamophobia” is part of the Edinburgh-based Centre for Human Ecology’s Action for Transformation work, supported by the Quaker Concerns programme of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. He is an Associate of the Iona Community and from 1986-1990 was its Business Advisor.

Professor Watt, how did you become interested in Islam and Christianity?

Well, I had studied Classics at Edinburgh University and “Greats” - philosophy and ancient history - at Oxford. From 1934 to 1938 I taught moral philosophy at Edinburgh University. In 1937 when my mother died, I asked an Indian (later Pakistani) Muslim to come as a paying guest to help me pay for a housekeeper. Khwaja Abdul Mannan was a student of veterinary medicine and at that time, aged

about 20, a member of the Ahmadiyya Community - something he would have had to give up later when he became a Colonel in the Pakistani army. Mannan, as he called himself, was an argumentative Muslim, and our many discussions over breakfast and evening meals raised my interest in the world of Islam. I believe that he is still alive in Lahore.

When I heard that the Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem wanted someone to work on Muslim-Christian relations I applied for the post. After studying theology and being ordained priest, I began to learn Arabic in London. Between 1941 and 1943 I completed my PhD at Edinburgh on freewill and predestination in early Islam. That was with Richard Bell, famous for translation of the Qur’an (Koran). Between 1944 and 1946 I worked in Palestine under the Bishop of Jerusalem. I had hoped to have discussions with Muslims, but Jerusalem proved not to be a good place to get in contact with intellectual Muslims. In 1946 things became difficult. I lost a friend when they blew up the King David Hotel. After leave I decided not to return to Jerusalem. In 1947 I became head of the department of Arabic & Islamic Studies at Edinburgh University and continued there until my retirement in 1979 at the age of 70. In 1964 I received the title of Professor. I remain a priest in the Scottish Episcopalian Church and am presently writing another book about a Christian faith for today.

Your life’s work has been devoted to dialogue between Islam and Christianity. Why is this important?

In the outburst of missionary activity round about the year 1800 the ideal was to go into the non-Christian parts of the world and convert everyone to Christianity; and this is still the ideal of some Christians. From Islam, however, there were very few converts. I have now come to doubt the appropriateness of conversion in many cases. The nineteenth-century missionaries did not appreciate the positive achievements of the great religions in giving their communities a tolerable and meaningful form of life. In the course of the years I have made many Muslim friends, some of them in influential positions. These persons are deeply rooted in their religion and are doing excellent work not only for their fellow-Muslims but also for wider circles. I would indeed admit that sometimes conversion may be necessary for an individual’s spiritual health and growth; but this is exceptional. For such reasons I hold that the Christian aim for the foreseeable future should be to bring the religions together in friendly dialogue and, where possible, in cooperation, for there is a sense in which all are threatened by the rising tide of secularism and materialism.

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Many Westerners would question the value of dialogue with Islam because, for example, they see the Sharia as being cruel. Do you think this is true?

Well, similar punishments are found in the Old Testament - including, for example, the cutting off of women's hands in Deuteronomy 25. In Islamic teaching, such penalties may have been suitable for the age in which Muhammad lived. However, as societies have since progressed and become more peaceful and ordered, they are not suitable any longer.

If we demonise one another we cannot even debate such things. Dialogue is therefore imperative. It helps us to discern not just the meaning of the Holy Scriptures, but also the relevance that God wants them to have in our times.

What about the attitude of Muhammad (peace be upon him) towards women?

It is true that Islam is still, in many ways, a man's religion. But I think I've found evidence in some of the early sources that seems to show that Muhammad made things better for women. It appears that in some parts of Arabia, notably in Mecca, a matrilineal system was in the process of being replaced by a patrilineal one at the time of Muhammad. Growing prosperity caused by a shifting of trade routes was accompanied by a growth in individualism. Men were amassing considerable personal wealth and wanted to be sure that this would be inherited by their own actual sons, and not simply by an extended family of their sisters' sons. This led to a deterioration in the rights of women. At the time Islam began, the conditions of women were terrible - they had no right to own property, were supposed to be the property of the man, and if the man died everything went to his sons. Muhammad improved things quite a lot. By instituting rights of property ownership, inheritance, education and divorce, he gave women certain basic safeguards. Set in such historical context the Prophet can be seen as a figure who testified on behalf of women's rights.

A lot also depends on what sort of Muslim society you look at. Many Westerners today think that Islam holds women in the heaviest oppression. That may be so in some cases, but only because they look at certain parts of the Islamic world. Pakistan, Bangladesh and Turkey have all had women heads of state. I therefore don't think the perception of Westerners is entirely correct.

What about war - Jihad versus Crusade? Terrorism, for example, can be considered both unislamic and unchristian, yet we see it justified by extremists whether in Egypt or

Northern Ireland. Do you think violence can be part of faith?

Well, I think fundamentalists of any religion go beyond what their religion is about. But let me take an example from our Old Testament. I'm becoming very worried about the Old Testament because so much of it is unchristian. I read a passage every day and find it more and more so. There is a serious matter which is not clear from some translations. The New Jerusalem Bible that I read uses the phrase "curse of destruction," and this was applied to towns when the Hebrews were coming into Palestine. They killed everyone in a town - men, women, children and sometimes also animals. This happened in Jericho as we see in Joshua 6, and in about a dozen other places; and there are also later instances. This is definitely unchristian.

I think on the whole Christianity is against war, though in the past Christians have supported wars. I don't think Islam is basically anti-Christian, but some extremists might take such a view.

There was a formal gathering of Scottish Christians and Muslims at the national service of reconciliation in Edinburgh following the Gulf War a few years ago. Scottish church leaders had refused the government's wish to make it a service of "thanksgiving." They called it, instead, one of "reconciliation." The time of day coincided with the Muslim's evening call to prayer. At first the Muslims thought this would prevent them from attending. But then, to avoid any problem, they were allowed to say their prayers in St Giles Cathedral in front of the Christian altar while the Christian congregation kept silent. The following week Christians prayed in the community centre of the Glasgow Mosque. This would mirror the tradition that Muhammad allowed Christian delegations visiting him to pray in the Mosque. Such a happening in modern Scotland, even after a war, suggests that religion can bridge the wounds of war.

I therefore certainly don't think the West is locked into Jihad with Islam, though I suppose if the fundamentalists go too far they'll have to be opposed. Iran's comments about the "Great Satan" were aimed mostly at the United States: they were not made because the West was Christian. I think the West should try to overcome these strains between different religious groups. I do, however, think that the US is following a very dangerous policy in relation to the Middle East. The root of this trouble is that the US gives too much support to Israel. They allow them to have nuclear weapons and to do all sorts of things, some of which are contrary even to Jewish law. Jewish families occupy Arab

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houses without payment. That is stealing. I think that the US should be much firmer with Israel and put a lot of pressure on them, though this is difficult because of the strong Jewish lobby. Unless something is done there'll be dangerous conflict in the Middle East. Such danger would be less likely to arise if all three Abrahamic faiths - Jews, Christians and Muslims - paid greater respect to what God teaches us about living together.

Do you think that the newly re-established Scottish Parliament should take any position on the Middle East?

The Scots Parliament should keep to a middle course and certainly not join the anti-Islamic side. I'm sure it would like to see some balance of Jews and Muslims in the Middle East, and of course, fair treatment for the Palestinian Arabs, some of whom are Christian. The Scottish Parliament might try and help them to come to terms with one another.

Within Scotland, the parliament should work for some harmony between religions as there are Muslims and Jews, as well as Christians, in Scotland. With luck there'll be one or two Muslim MSPs. The big question is whether the Nationalists will win and go on to demand independence which I think might be a good thing, though I'm neither strongly for or against independence.

Islam maintains that the word of God is final and we can't change it. Christianity, with its understanding of the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit, is in constant flux. Where do you stand on this difference?

I would be inclined to say that the Qur'an is the word of God for a particular time and place and will not therefore necessarily suit other times and places. The prohibition on usury may have been good for a certain time and place but that doesn't mean it will always be good.

You see, I think that Muslims need help in reaching a fresh understanding of the Qur'an as God's word, but comparison with the Bible does not help much. The Qur'an came to Muhammad in a period of less than 25 years, whereas from Moses to Paul is about 1300 years. Christians could perhaps show from the Bible that there is a development in God's relation to the human race. For example, Moses was told to order the death penalty by stoning for anyone who broke the Sabbath by gathering firewood on it. Joshua was told to exterminate the whole population of various towns, men women and children. Could the loving God taught by Jesus have given such barbaric and bloodthirsty orders? To say "No," as one would like to do, throws doubt on the inspiration

of the Bible. We seem to have to say that the precise commands which God gives to believers depend on the form of society in which they are living. Traditionally Muslims have argued from God's eternity that the commands he gives are unalterable, and they have not admitted that social forms can change.

I therefore do not believe that either the Bible or the Qur'an is infallibly true in the sense that all their commands are valid for all time. The commands given in both books were true and valid for the societies to which the revelations were primarily addressed; but when the form of society changes in important respects some commands cease to be appropriate, though many others continue to be valid. I do, however, believe that Muhammad, like the earlier prophets, had genuine religious experiences. I believe that he really did receive something directly from God. As such, I believe that the Qur'an came from God, that it is Divinely inspired. Muhammad could not have caused the great upsurge in religion that he did without God's blessing.

The diagnosis of the Meccan situation by the Qur'an is that the troubles of the time were primarily religious, despite their economic, social and moral undercurrents, and as such capable of being remedied only by means that are primarily religious. In view of Muhammad's effectiveness in addressing this, he would be a bold man who would question the wisdom of the Qur'an.

What do you think of the Qur'anic statement that the Old Testament has been changed, thus accounting for some of the differences between the Abrahamic faiths?

Well, I think that the later writers sometimes changed earlier things to make them more suitable for their contemporaries. I think there was a lot of rewriting of the Old Testament, though the form in which we have it hasn't been changed since the Christian era. I see the Old Testament as the record of a developing religion. As a religion develops some of the earlier stages may have to be abandoned completely. An example might be Islamic teachings on usury. I don't see how it is possible completely to get rid of usury. We'll have to see how Islamic attempts to get rid of usury work. Undoubtedly capitalism has got to be restricted in various ways. The world is certainly in a mess at the moment, but how we can get out of it, I don't know. All I can say is that there are things that Christianity can learn from Islam, especially on its spiritual side, and Islam can perhaps learn from Christian understanding of God in relation to the universe and human life. I think Muslims

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would find that this might give a slightly greater emphasis to something in their own faith.

I think another thing is that we have all got to come to terms with the scientific outlook of today. That is very critical of the Old Testament. Old Testament says a lot about God's anger which I think is based on some of the false ideas that the Old Testament people had. They thought, you see, that God could interfere with the laws of nature. They thought that God made the sun stand still for a whole day so that Joshua could get a great victory. Well, that's impossible. They thought that God could intervene with his own natural laws and punish people. Well, I think there is a sense in which wrongdoing is punished, but even in the Bible it is recognised that the wicked sometimes flourish. There are different strands of thinking in the Bible.

Islam requires belief in God as revealed in "the books" - not just the one book. This arguably incorporates Christian and Jewish scriptures. What, then, do you think Judeo-Christian understandings might have to teach Islam?

I think Muslims will have to take the work of Christ more seriously, even if they simply regard him as a prophet. The view I take, in accordance with the creeds, is that he was truly human. He wasn't a superman. That leaves you with the question of how he was also divine, but I think we have to look much more at his humanity. I also don't think he was able to work miracles except for those that other saints could also do - such as curing the sick. I don't think some of the other miracles really happened. For instance, one of the outstanding things was the supposed changing of water into wine at a marriage feast. This is given in the 4th gospel and is said to be the first of the signs of Jesus' achievement. Clearly, this was meant to be understood symbolically, because making a lot of wine has nothing to do with the Gospel. It was meant to symbolise changing something ordinary into something precious, which is what Jesus had achieved. It was not meant to be taken literally - there was a tremendous amount of wine involved - the equivalent of about 900 bottles - and I don't think Jesus was an alcoholic.

In the Qur'an there is very little knowledge of Judaism and almost none of Christianity except about such points as the virgin birth. There are references to Moses and Abraham and so forth, but nothing about, for example, the settlement of Israel in Palestine and the achievements of the later prophets with their important emphasis on justice. I cannot believe that God would not bless the development of greater awareness amongst Muslims of these things.

And what can Islam teach Christianity?

Speaking personally, it has taught me to think more deeply about the oneness of God. I am not happy with the traditional Trinitarian Christian formulation of God comprising three "persons" - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The word "person" has changed since it was first used in English four centuries ago. It was a translation of the Latin persona - a face or mask, such as that used by actors. Now the English word means an individual, which is different. Christianity is not trying to say that God comprises three individuals. Islam, with its many different names for the qualities of God, can help the Christian see a more true meaning of Trinitarian doctrine. The Trinity is different faces or roles of the same one God. For me, that insight has been a direct result of my study of Islam.

There is a prayer that you have long used that brings together the Judeo-Christian with the Islamic before the God of us all. Might we close our interview with that?

O Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, grant that the whole house of Islam, and we Christians with them, may come to know you more clearly, serve you more nearly, and love you more dearly. Amen.

Professor Watt, thank you, so very much.

