1. The Origins of Islam
2. The Qur’an
3. Islamic Belief and Practice
4. Evangelism or Dialogue
5. Extremism
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SESSION 1 – THE ORIGINS OF ISLAM

Aim: to know something of the roots of Islam and understand some of the similarities and differences between Islam and Christianity in the way the religions were established.

1.1 BACKGROUND INFO:

7th Century Arabia – a context ripe for Islamic expansion

Arabia consisted of many groups of often nomadic tribes, with some settled in the larger cities like Mecca and Medina. There was no unified governance or system but fragile alliances and frequent fighting between tribes.

The two great world powers of the time were the Byzantine Empire (centred in Constantinople, and Christian Orthodox) and the Persian Empire (centred in Iraq). Both of these empires had been exhausted by battles over Jerusalem and there was a vacuum ready to be filled by the rise of Islam.

Mecca had begun to be a major commercial centre in trading routes running north to south and east to west bringing with it the inevitable opening up of influences from other cultures. Though there was belief in one supreme God (Allah), idol worship prevailed and sacrifices were offered to goddesses such as Manat, Al lat and Al Uzza and to spirits in caves, trees and wells. There was a strong belief in fate and little or no belief in an afterlife.

There were significant Jewish communities especially around Mecca, and Christians among the foreign populations of black slaves from Ethiopia and labourers and traders from Syria. It is believed that Muhammad had had contact with Syrian monks in the desert while trading. Most of the Christians in Arabia were not Arabs and it is generally agreed that Muhammad cannot have had access to any books of the Bible in his own language of Arabic. The Christian Church at that time was also divided by disputes over doctrine about the humanity and deity of Jesus with various heresies commonplace. The Church was very much associated with the Byzantine Empire and the wielding of political power to persecute and oppress those from different heretical and foreign sects.

Timeline of the origins of Islam:

AD 570 - Birth of Muhammad, who belonged to the tribe of Quereish, in Mecca, Arabia. His father died before he was born, and his mother died six years later. He was brought up by his grandfather and his uncle, Abu Talib.

AD 595 – Muhammad marries the wealthy widow Khadija and begins working with her trading business.

AD 610 – Muhammad’s first call to be a Prophet, while meditating in a cave on Mount Hira, near Mecca: the first of the ‘revelations’. He shared these with others and a small number accepted the message and became Muslims.

AD 622 – The Emigration (hijra) to Medina in response to an invitation from a group of Muslim converts (‘Helpers’) for him to come to resolve the conflicts between the different communities in Medina. The beginning of the Muslim era and date from which the Muslim
1. The Origins of Islam

Calendar begins.

AD 624 – Muslims begin raiding caravans from Mecca – which leads to a series of battles: Battle of Badr – Muslims (324 men) defeated Meccans (950 men).

AD 628 – The Treaty of Hudaibiyah, between Muhammad and the Meccans, which enables him to return to Mecca on pilgrimage the following year.

AD 629 – Muhammad and the Muslims return to Mecca with 10,000 men. Meccans submit without fighting. Muhammad declares a general amnesty. All idols in the ka’ba are destroyed (this is the large black cube at the centre of the mosque in Mecca that Muslims visit on pilgrimage and is represented in many devotional pictures in Muslim homes).

AD 632 – Muhammad dies in Medina.

AD 680 – death of Hussein (son of Ali, Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law) at the Battle of Karbala. A crucial date setting in place the split between Sunnis, who believed the successor to the Prophet Muhammad should be chosen by the community and Shi’ites who believed the leader should be from the Prophet’s family.

1.2 WARM-UP AND DISCUSS: Who do you think you are?

In the hallway of a good friend of mine is a framed family tree complete with sepia-tinted photographs going back to Victorian times. What is startling about some of the photographs is the incredible family resemblances between current family members and their long-deceased great, great, great grandfathers. Have you done a family tree? What have you found? Anyone famous/notorious? Where does your surname come from?

1.3 DID YOU KNOW?......Conversion or Reversion?

Here is a list of Muslim prophets with the names that Christians normally attribute to them:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>Ayyub</th>
<th>Job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>Musa</td>
<td>Moses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idris</td>
<td>Enoch</td>
<td>Harun</td>
<td>Aaron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuh</td>
<td>Noah</td>
<td>Dhul Kifl</td>
<td>Ezekiel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hud</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Dawud</td>
<td>David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salih</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Sulaiman</td>
<td>Soloman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ibrahim</td>
<td>Abraham</td>
<td>Ilyas</td>
<td>Elias</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ismail</td>
<td>Ishmael</td>
<td>Al Yasa</td>
<td>Elisha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ishaq</td>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>Yunus</td>
<td>Jonah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lut</td>
<td>Lot</td>
<td>Zakariya</td>
<td>Zechariah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yaqub</td>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>Yahya</td>
<td>John the Baptist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yusuf</td>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>Isa</td>
<td>Jesus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shuaib</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Muhammad</td>
<td>Muhammad</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q1 - What do you notice about these names? How do you feel about seeing so many familiar names common to the Muslim faith?
1. The Origins of Islam

REFLECTION:

Muslims would see all these men as ‘prophets’. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, characters like Adam, Jacob and Job would not be classified as prophets. It’s worth noting that whenever we think about other faiths, we need to be aware that there will be particular understandings about worship, scripture and doctrine that we need to be able to unpack. It’s very easy to classify religions by their festivals, books and religious practises and think we know what we are talking about because we too have festivals, a book and modes of worship. It’s always worth trying to dig deeper and to understand what is meant in a particular faith, by words that we may share.

So, for Muslims, a prophet is someone who is obedient to God, follows his ways and whom God uses to call back people to worship him again. Throughout history, God uses faithful servants to reaffirm true worship when humanity has turned away. Islam sees itself, then, as a ‘primordial’ religion: from the beginning of time, submission to Allah is required and a series of revelations has been given, culminating in the final message given to Muhammad. Jesus, or Isa, is a major prophet in Islam who will return at the Last Judgment, but the complete message required for obedience rests in the Qur’an, what Allah has given to Muhammad.

Q2 - What do you take to be the Christian understanding of a ‘prophet’? Do you see any differences between Old Testament and New Testament understandings?

REFLECTION:

Interestingly, those who convert to Islam from a non-Islamic background are known as ‘reverts’, not converts. This flows from the sense that the whole world is submitted to Allah (and is therefore ‘Muslim’) but human beings choose to stray off the path of truth in their ignorance and wilfulness. Allah uses prophets to end ignorance and through the Qur’an, there is now all that is required for obedience. A Muslim is therefore choosing to go back to the truth that he or she was born to follow.


We tend to brush over these genealogies or just suffer them during Advent readings. They do give us some key pointers to the origins and nature of the Christian faith, though. The Luke family tree goes right back to Adam, the ‘son of God’, while the Matthew, introduces Jesus, ‘the son of David’ and begins the family tree from Abraham, taking a different route to Jesus, ‘who is called Christ’. The gospel writers clearly had different intentions in announcing Jesus’ credentials. For Luke, Jesus is the culmination of God’s plans ever since the Fall, the ‘new Adam’, the son of God who will bring about the new creation. Matthew is addressing a Jewish audience and underlining Jesus’ Jewish credentials. He is in the line of King David, symbol of Israel flourishing and God being close, and rooted in the original call and blessing given to Abraham.

Origins matter because our past does shape the present. When we look at Islam, we see, perhaps uncomfortably, many common elements, some shared stories and shared characters. It becomes especially important, then, to know our own roots and the distinguishing nature of the Christian faith. In the Luke family tree, we see our Christian
1. The Origins of Islam

story in the light of the history of the world. In the Matthew family tree, we see the Christian story with its roots in God’s call to Israel.

Bishop Tom Wright has a neat way of helping us to grasp this tension by dividing the Bible into 5 ‘Acts’, like a Shakespeare play:

**Act 1 = Creation** – God creates a ‘good earth’ and humanity is ‘very good’

**Act 2 = The Fall** – our rebellion breaks the all relationships, and ultimately our relationship with God, bringing suffering and death

**Act 3 = Israel** – God chooses a particular people to embody his way and model his life to the whole world

**Act 4 = Jesus** – the central character in the whole story: ‘God with us’ who as the perfect man can bring healing to creation and mend the break between God and humanity

**Act 5 = The Church** – Jesus commissions his followers to implement that healing to all people and all cultures. We have the first scene of Act 5 (The Acts of the Apostles) and the last scene (Revelation), and the Church’s task is to bring forward God’s new creation into the present

This is a very different understanding of history from Islam. It is not ‘ignorance’ that stops us from obeying God. Even close attention to the Bible is insufficient for us to please him. The whole of creation is broken and Jesus, decisively, in his death and resurrection, has inaugurated a new age where God is with us, by his Holy Spirit, in the church and in the world, to bring healing, peace, righteousness and justice: ‘Shalom’.

If you look closely at the family trees in Matthew and Luke, you will see Jesus’ heritage including some of the most unsavoury characters. If you have time, use a concordance to look up the stories of Rahab, Perez, Noah, Solomon and even David. Murderers, prostitutes, users of prostitutes and idol-worshippers are included in the heritage of Jesus.

The Christian story has a very clear sense of our sinfulness and our brokenness and it is this world that God’s life enters and embraces in Jesus, who was without sin.

**Challenge for discussion:** *We have both similarity and difference in the roots of Christianity and Islam. How do you think this should affect our attitude to Muslims?*

If a key difference is the sense of our failure, even the failure of God’s servants in the Bible, perhaps we should approach anyone who does not share our faith with humility rather than arrogance. As there are some shared stories, we ought to approach Islam with some sympathy too, freely able to affirm what we do hear as being recognisable to us as Christians.

1.5 GO AND DO

This week, buy an English translation of the Qur’an or borrow one from your local library. Don’t attempt to read the book through, but look at the index for familiar names to you: Jesus, Noah, Moses, Mary. Look up those passages that include references to Bible characters you know and find out what is similar, and what strikes you as different in the stories that are told.
A FAITH TO FAITH STUDY COURSE

Reflecting on Islam

A five session course for small groups, reflecting on beliefs and traditions in Islam

1. The Origins of Islam
2. The Qur’an
3. Islamic Belief and Practice
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A Faith to Faith small group study course, sponsored by the Saltley Trust and written by Richard Sudworth

Faith to Faith is a forum within the Global Connections network

Global Connections, Caswell Road, Sydenham Industrial Estate, Leamington Spa, Warwicks CV31 1QF
01926 487755 faithtofaith@globalconnections.co.uk www.globalconnections.co.uk
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SESSION 2 – THE QUR’AN

Aim: to understand how Muslims view the Qur’an, to reflect on its role in Muslim spirituality and theology and to think through the differences in approaches to scripture in the Christian faith.

2.1 BACKGROUND INFO:

“Read Al-Qur’an: The Last Testament!”
The above sign is posted high on the walls of the mosque opposite the church that I am a member of. The message is quite clearly intended for Christians: within Islam, the Qur’an is a further and complete revelation that shows the way to live. This, from “Islam: A Brief Guide” shows how a Muslim views their scripture:

“The Qur’an is the sacred book of Muslims, and the final Book of Guidance from Allah, sent down to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel. Every word of the Qur’an is the Word of Allah. Revealed over a period of 23 years in the Arabic language, it contains 114 chapters (surahs) – over 6,000 verses. Muslims learn to read it in Arabic and many memorise it completely. Muslims are expected to try their best to understand the Qur’an and practice its teachings.

The Qur’an is unrivalled in its recordings and preservation. Astonishingly, it has remained unchanged even to a letter over fourteen centuries. In the Qur’an Allah addresses human beings directly. Its style cannot be compared with any other book. The Qur’an deals with man and his ultimate goal in life. Its teachings cover all aspects of this life and the life after death. It contains principles, doctrines and directions for every sphere of human activity…. The success of human beings on this Earth and in the life hereafter depends on belief in and obedience to the teachings of the Qur’an.”

As Christians, it’s sometimes hard for us to understand that many Muslims will read and learn to recite the Qur’an in Arabic from a young age without necessarily understanding the meaning in their own language (English, Urdu etc). The Christian equivalent of the Qur’an is actually Jesus; the “Word of God”. Muslims see the very existence of the Qur’an as a miracle, God’s words unadulterated but present in the world. This is why the Qur’an, strictly speaking, should only be read in Arabic, because translation is an attempt to make human what cannot be changed or accommodated. A major part of the experience of the Qur’an is hearing the lilt of the Arabic, so it becomes, for many Muslims, an “experience” more so than a text to analyse. For this reason, many Muslims revere the physical book of the Qur’an: it will not be written in or treated in any disrespectful way, such as leaving it on the floor or scribbling in the margin as we may do in our Bibles.

In addition to the Qur’an, there are short accounts of words or acts of Muhammad compiled by companions of the prophet in various collections known as hadith. The hadith contain the actions or words of Muhammad and are therefore the sunna, the “way of the Prophet”, providing the embodiment in action of what it means to obey the word of God in the Qur’an. There are different collections of hadith with varying authority and weight within various Islamic schools of thought.
2. The Qur’an

Delving into the Qur’an:
The Qur’an can be a very intimidating book for Christians to begin to read so it is worth going straight to well-known passages and themes. Below are some suggestions for sources in the Qur’an; if you have time as a group, you may wish to encourage people to look up specific surahs (the name given to chapters in the Qur’an) and share what they discover there:

Some well-known passages
2.255 – A well-known verse about the sovereignty of God
2.256 – “There is no compulsion in religion”
24.35-36 – A passage that has been a source of inspiration to mystics
59.22-24 – Verses about “the most beautiful names” of God

Typical passages
- About the Creation, 3.189-191; 13.2-4; 31.10-11; 32.4-9; 45.3-5
- About heaven and hell, 2.24-25; 38.49-60; 44.47-57
- About prophets, 2.124-136

Laws
- About marriage, 4.3
- About theft, 5.38
- About usury, 2.275-279
- About obedience to parents, 29.8
- About wine, 2.219
- About pork, 2.173
- A summary of moral law, 2.83; 2.177

Use the index to see verses that reference:
- Abraham
- Marriage
- Divorce
- Jews
- Christians
- Satan
- Adultery, etc

2.2 WARM-UP AND DISCUSS: Back to the Book

Brainstorm as a group: what types of books are there in the Bible? There are different ‘genres’, books with different purposes and styles within the Bible; can you list them all? Hopefully, you will have genres such as ‘history’ or ‘prophets’. Now share as a group: what are your favourite books or verses in the Bible? What does the Bible mean to you and why? It’s good to remind ourselves what the Bible means to us as Christians and to be aware that other faiths will have not have the same approach to their scriptures.
2. The Qur’an

2.3 DID YOU KNOW? The Muslim view of the Bible

Muslims believe in scriptures that have been given, by revelation, before the Qur’an. These are:

- The Law (revealed to Moses) = The Tawrat (2.87; 3.3)
- The Psalms (revealed to David) = The Zabur (4.163)
- The Gospels (revealed to Jesus) = The Injil (5.46-48)

Despite these, Muslims believe that Christians and Jews have tampered with their scriptures, confirmed in the use of translations rather than original texts, and have changed the accounts. So, importantly, Muslims do not believe that Jesus died on the cross, the Qur’an offering the true account of Jesus’ life, God rescuing him from the cross and taking him up into heaven. The Qur’an, for Muslims then, is the complete scripture, unchanged, reliable, spoken by God and sufficient for guidance into the truth.

Q1 - If the equivalent of the Qur’an to Christians is Jesus, how important is the Bible then to Christians?

REFLECTION:

Because Muslims treat the Qur’an with such reverence and seriousness, it helps that Christians are serious about their use of the Bible. It is good to be seen to take scripture as a guiding source, and to refer to events in the life of Jesus and the Prophets. Where there are shared characters and events, Muslims will be open to hearing those stories and respect their use in shaping Christian behaviour and understanding. There will be inevitable differences in the use of scripture but it is important to underline, in an age that devalues the significance of sacred texts, that Christians will be respected for using the Bible openly.

Q2 - When you read different books of the Bible, there are differences that reflect the styles, cultures and agendas of the writers. This is something that Muslims would struggle with and see in that confirmation that the scriptures are corrupted and not from God. What do you think?

For Christians, the idea of the inspiration of scripture is that God speaks through personalities and culture to present himself. By his Holy Spirit, God uses the writers to present truth to us. The Bible, then, is not a tablet handed down from on high, but speaks to a particular time and place in order to speak to us through history. This reflects deeper understandings about the nature of God in Christian thinking. As one Christian theologian said, “God only speaks dialect”. God is a God who incarnates this world; speaks in and through people. The Muslim emphasis on the all-powerful nature of God means that nothing can be 'associated' with him: that is, there is nothing that can embody or speak of God. That would be a blasphemy and the unpardonable sin of shirk.
2.4 BIBLE READING - John 1: 1-18

In this famous passage we have a key text about the nature of Jesus, and a window into the nature of God. It starts with a very clear statement that God’s plans that came into fruition in the life of Jesus were cosmic plans. The God of Israel, the Prophets, of Jesus, is the God of the whole universe. This is something that Muslims would heartily agree with. However, the “Word” identified as Jesus brings a crucial difference. Eugene Peterson’s paraphrasing of verse 14 puts it like this: “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood”. Our God, who no-one has ever seen (verse 18) has made himself known by living as a human being, in a time and place; walking, working, speaking, sleeping, laughing and crying. Essentially, John is saying, “If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.” Muslims esteem Jesus very highly as a prophet but to ‘associate’ Jesus with God like this goes against Islamic thinking.

Part of our responsibility as Christians is to model God’s life on earth, not just by example, but by being communities where people can discover the reality of God at work. Ultimately, the differences that we as Christians have over scripture and the nature of God can only be communicated by lives that are incarnated amongst Muslims. If we believe God “only speaks dialect”, what might it mean for churches to speak the language of Muslims so that they taste something of God’s love for the whole earth?

Challenge for discussion:
As Christians in recent years have rediscovered the “grace” of the gospel and the potential for intimacy with God the Father in our worship, have we become too cosy and even disrespectful of God? Can we learn something from the reverence and awe that Muslims have in their attitude to God and in their worship and approach to scripture?

2.5 GO AND DO

If you live in or near a major city, make a point of visiting a Muslim area and searching for signs of the Qur’an in daily life. You should see Qur’anic verses written in Arabic on car dashboards and on building fronts and recitations played aloud in shops. If you are able to visit a Muslim bookshop, do so: talk to the owner about the Qur’an and ask him or her, what it means to them. If you are not able to visit a Muslim area, then approach a colleague or neighbour that you know to be Muslim and ask them about their use of the Qur’an. Failing that, search the web for Muslim sites that provide commentaries and reflections on the Qur’an: reflect on the similarities and differences to your use of the Bible.
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SESSION 3 – ISLAMIC BELIEF AND PRACTICE

Aim: to learn the Five Pillars of Islam and to reflect on the core beliefs and practices of Islam in the light of the Muslim prayer, the “Fatihah”.

3.1 BACKGROUND INFO:

The Five Pillars

The starting point of being a Muslim is the declaration of faith, known as the Shahadah. This statement is: “There is no god except Allah; Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah”. For someone to declare these words sincerely would make them a Muslim and it is thus a foundational pillar to which the other pillars and obligations of Islam follow. The five pillars are:

a. Shahadah – this declaration contains within it 2 vital concepts in Islam. The first is the “oneness” of God (known as Tawhid), the second is in the prophethood (Risalah) of Muhammad. An additional fundamental belief of Islam would be in the after-life (Akhirah) dependent upon a day of judgment.

b. Salah – compulsory prayer offered five times daily, whenever possible in a congregation, or individually. If a Muslim is unable to pray at the set-times perhaps because they are working, then the prayers ought to be said at the next available opportunity and have to be added to the other sessions. In many Muslim cultures, corporate prayer in mosques is often restricted to the men, though many mosques now have designated space for women to pray and many Muslim women will pray at home.

c. Zakah – the word literally means “purification” but relates to the compulsory giving of a share of the wealth of every Muslim (2.5% annually). This is not the same as “charity” which is optional and additional, but Zakah can only be spent on the poor and needy.

d. Sawm – this is the annual obligatory fast during Ramadan. From dawn to sunset every day a Muslim refrains from eating, drinking, smoking and sex. It is a means of developing a believer’s moral and spiritual standards.

e. Hajj – this is the annual pilgrimage to the Ka‘bah (the “House of Allah”) in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. It is obligatory for every Muslim at least once in their lifetime, assuming they have the financial resources to go. It is an affirmation of the unity of the whole of humanity as people from every race gather to worship God.

The Two Main Festivals

Idul Fitr – After a month of fasting during Ramadan, communal prayer is offered to God and then special food is prepared and visits to family and friends undertaken.

Idul Adha - Some time after Ramadan, this festival remembers Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his own son, and God’s provision of a ram. An animal is slaughtered and eaten and meat shared with family, neighbours and the poor. For Muslims, Ishmael is the son who was going to be sacrificed, as opposed to the Jewish and Christian recognition of Isaac in the Hebrew Bible.

Islamic festivals are observed according to the Islamic calendar, which is based on twelve
3. Islamic Belief and Practice

lunar months (about 11 days shorter than the solar year). As they are dependent on the appearance of the moon, the exact times (including times for prayer) will vary and the dates will move each year.

3.2 WARM-UP AND DISCUSS: Pillars of Christianity?

Brainstorm as a group: what would you say are the main pillars of the Christian faith? Is there a list of essential Christian beliefs and/or practices?

REFLECTION:

It’s a tricky one for Christians isn’t it? In terms of beliefs, we might mention one of the creeds: the Nicene or Apostles’ Creed. Many people simply state the Trinity as the core Christian belief. Although the idea of the “three-in-one” is beyond our reasoning to grasp fully, it does speak about God being a God of relationship. God is a God of love and Jesus is the revelation of that God, now available to us in the church through his Holy Spirit.

When we come to practices, it’s especially difficult. We can outline Christian values, or list the fruits of the spirit (love, joy, peace etc) but part of our Christian understanding is that we continue, even as Christians, to fail. With practices such as prayer, Bible reading and going to church, we can affirm these as integral to the Christian life but their outward form doesn’t make them inevitably “Christ-like”. The Christian faith is dependent upon grace: we cannot “earn” our way to God; his life is a gift to us.

This difficulty is one that Muslims feel quite keenly when they look at Christians. Some Muslims have said to me, “Islam is straightforward; we do these things, and it’s very clear how I please God.” Part of our good news, but also our challenge in being understood by Muslims, is that the Christian faith is in essence a relationship. Responding to God’s call on our lives in Jesus, brings us into a new relationship with God. Like any good relationship, it cannot be forced, faked and defined by rules, though there are rules that we can, and do, break as Christians.

3.3 DID YOU KNOW? The Fatihah

The Fatihah is the first book (surah) in the Qur’an. It literally means “the opener” and is prayed by every Muslim whenever they pray. It is the nearest equivalent to the Lord’s Prayer and will be known by every Muslim, in Arabic, and reflects some core beliefs about the nature of God. This is Kenneth Cragg’s translation of the prayer:

In the name of the merciful Lord of mercy,  
Praise be to God, the Lord of all being,  
The merciful Lord of mercy,  
Master of the Day of Judgement,  
Thee alone we worship  
And to thee alone we come for aid,  
Guide us in the straight path,  
The path of those whom Thou hast blessed,
3. Islamic Belief and Practice

Not of those against whom there is displeasure,
Nor of those who go astray.  
(from “The Event of the Qur’an”, p 74)

It’s worth noting the dual emphasis on God’s sovereignty but also on his mercy. It’s very easy to caricature Islam as a religion where God is all-powerful and vengeful but actually in this core prayer there is a deep appreciation of God’s mercy. In the prayer, those on the “straight path” would have been all of God’s prophets who have gone before. Remember that in a desert culture, the straight paths have been marked by travellers and lead to water. Leaving these marked trails would lead to inevitable death. It is with awe and a clear accountability to God that a Muslim comes in prayer.

Q1 - Discuss this as a group. Could you pray this prayer as a Christian?

REFLECTION:

I’m sure you had different responses within your group. Ultimately, you cannot pray something that you are uncomfortable with but the question does raise some issues for us. Probably the biggest question we have, and it has been ducked until now, is this: “When Muslims talk of Allah, are they talking of the God that Christians worship?” The translation of the Fatihah used the word “God” and so made it easier for us to accept the prayer, and so far in these studies I have used Allah and God interchangeably. What should we understand by “Allah” then?

An important point to note is that across the Arab world, Christians refer to God as “Allah”. My own Arabic Bible from my time in North Africa uses the word “Allah”. The more significant question is, “what do we understand by the nature of God as Christians?” Colin Chapman has formulated a diagram that may be helpful for us:

In the crossover of the two circles, there is an overlap of certain attributes of God, shared between Christians and Muslims. Even these statements are not without their discussion because we will interpret characteristics such as “love” in different ways. For Christians, love is demonstrated in God’s self-giving love on the cross. For Muslims, love is expressed
3. Islamic Belief and Practice

in mercy but not in the self-limiting of God’s power that is suggested by the incarnation and cross. Importantly, though, the diagram gives us a starting point to begin discussions on some common ground. From there we can express what is distinctive about the Christian faith and learn more about the Muslim faith. Oftentimes, the difference is not whether but how God creates, is one, rules etc.

4. BIBLE READING – Acts 17: 16-34

This story of Paul in Athens is a classic missionary text. In it, we have Paul wrestling with the challenge of how to communicate the message of the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus into a completely pagan culture. Remember that Paul is an observant Jew and we sense something of his revulsion at the array of idols on display in Athens (v. 16). The hurdle Paul has to overcome, though, is how to present the story of the claims of Jesus on all people into cosmopolitan, idol-worshipping Athens when that story is centred on a Jewish rabbi who was the hope of monotheistic Israel.

What language does he use for “God” to start with? Does he talk of Yahweh or Elohim; Hebrew words for God? The language would be strange to the Greeks and it would make “God” out to be local; yet another deity to add to the array on display in Athens. So how about finding a word for God familiar to the Greeks such as Zeus? Zeus, the most powerful god of the Greeks arguably carries with him far too much baggage to be helpful as a way in to communication. The stories of Zeus and his exploits suggest a very different character and dubious values that would obscure the story of the God of Israel and the whole world.

Paul chooses the word, “theos”, a word from Greek philosophy that we have inherited in English to suggest ideas about god and the spiritual. Paul takes this philosophical starting point and begins to clothe it with the story and truths of the gospel: “The theos who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands” (v. 24). By pointing to the altar “to an unknown God”, Paul is finding a bridge of common understanding with which to share the Christian faith. Paul’s sermon actually builds on three Greek belief systems (Epicureanism, Stoicism and Gnosticism) affirming shared beliefs and then bringing the distinctiveness of the claims of Jesus, even quoting one of their poets where it speaks a truth that agrees with the Christian faith (v. 28).

Challenge for discussion: Paul saw in the altar to an unknown god the shared search for meaning and purpose in life beyond the material of the Athenians and the Christians. What aspects of Islam, or the beliefs of your friends and neighbours of all faiths and none, do you think could be similarly “altars to an unknown god”? How we do we affirm and acknowledge these and then present the distinctive truths of the Christian faith?

5. GO AND DO

Spend some time praying for Muslims around the world. Many Muslims are searching for God, sincere in their prayers and determined to follow the God who created heaven and earth. Pray that God will reveal himself to them in dreams and visions, in encounters with Christians, such that they may come into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.
Reflecting on Islam

A five session course for small groups, reflecting on beliefs and traditions in Islam

1. The Origins of Islam
2. The Qur’an
3. Islamic Belief and Practice
4. Evangelism or Dialogue
5. Extremism

A Faith to Faith small group study course, sponsored by the Saltley Trust and written by Richard Sudworth

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Faith to Faith is a forum within the Global Connections network
**Guidance Notes**

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It is recommended that one house group leader familiarises themselves with the material of each session beforehand, ensuring they have read all the material. Photocopying within one house group is permitted and each member of the group should have access to the notes. Additionally, it is recommended that house group members buy a copy of the Qur’an to aid their understanding through the course. Various English translations are available in most good bookshops.

There is a standard format for each session and should all the material be used then each session should last for up to one and a half hours.

- **Background Info** – This is especially important for the house group leader to have read beforehand
- **Warm-up and Discuss** – This is a starting point for discussion and the stimulation of ideas and is expected to run for around 15 minutes
- **Did you Know?** – This introduces an interesting or surprising aspect of Islam, to be shared by the leader and to invite responses, comments and discussion (20 minutes)
- **Bible Study** – Reading of the Bible study, discussion and reflection led by the person who has prepared in advance (30 minutes)
- **Go and Do** – A challenge or task to complete during the next week or a theme to pray around and for at the end of the meeting (10 minutes)

The times are flexible and leaders must feel free to allow space for discussion or prayer. The course material is there as a guide only and should people wish to do further reading, the following books are recommended:

- *'Cross and Crescent: Responding to the challenges of Islam'* - Colin Chapman (Nottingham: IVP, 2007)
- *'Kissing Cousins: Christians and Muslims Face to Face'* - Bill Musk (Oxford: Monarch, 2005)
- *'Friendship First'* - Steve Bell (Market Rasen: Friendship First, 2003)
SESSION 4 – EVANGELISM OR DIALOGUE?

Aim: To learn about the diversity of Islam and some of the key objections of Muslims to Christianity, to look at the principles of evangelism and dialogue with Muslims and to reflect on how these are both key activities for Christians.

4.1 BACKGROUND INFO:

A Diverse Islam

Despite the emphasis on the worldwide family of Islam (known as the “umma”), there is incredible diversity within the Muslim faith. It is vital that we appreciate that there are significant differences between Muslims, often related to country of origin but also of theology, culture and the results of the influence of being in the West.

The two main divisions within Islam are between Sunnis and Shi’ites:

Sunnis = 90-95% of the Muslim world. The word “Sunni” refers primarily to the sunna or customary practice of the prophet, Muhammad. This is the major branch of the Muslim community, but includes a variety of theological and legal schools.

Shi’ites = also known as Shi’at Ali, “the party of Ali”, because they broke away from the main body of Muslims in the middle of the 7th Century, insisting that Ali, the son-in-law of Muhammad, should have been the leader of the Muslim community after the prophet’s death, and that the leader of the Muslim community should always come from the family of the Prophet. Shi’ites are found mostly in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and India.

Two major movements within Islam:

Wahhabis = a traditional or conservative movement which began in Arabia in the 18th Century and has influenced many individuals, communities and movements which are termed “fundamentalist” or “Islamist” today.

Sufis = the mystical movement within Islam which has, for centuries, influenced the spirituality of many Muslims all over the world.

Movements within the Muslim community in the UK:

a. Deobandis = named after the town of Deoband north of Delhi, it is a reform version of Sufism with a strong emphasis on Islamic law and tradition

b. Tablighi Jama’at = a revivalist movement within the Deobandi tradition with a strong emphasis on individual morel and spiritual renewal

c. Barelwis = a movement named after the home town of its founder, Ahmad Raza Khan, affirming traditional Sufism and the legitimacy of certain aspects of “Folk Islam” such as prayers at the shrines of holy men and women which are deemed un-Islamic by conservative Muslims

d. Jama’at-I-Islami = a politico-religious party embodying the notion of Islam as a comprehensive ideology and critical of pietistic Islam. Groups in this tradition in Britain include UK Islamic Mission, The Islamic Foundation, Young Muslims UK, and The Islamic Society of Britain
4. Evangelism or Dialogue

e. **Ahl-i-Hadith** = a movement with an emphasis on individual personal faith rather than social or political awareness

f. **The Muslim Parliament** = this was founded in 1992 to express the consensus among British Muslims, especially on political and social issues, though it has failed to gain the support of the majority of Muslims

g. **Muslim Council of Britain (MCB)** = founded in 1997 to promote the cooperation, consensus and unity of Muslim affairs in the UK

h. **Hizb ut-Tahrir** = a party with a radical ideology looking to the revival of the Islamic State (the Caliphate or Kahlifa)

i. **Ahmadiyya** = its founder Mirza Ghulam Ahmad is regarded as a prophet by his followers and thus the movement is seen as being heretical by most Muslims

4.2 WARM-UP AND DISCUSS: The Church as a Mixed Bag

*Within your town, city or village, how many different church denominations are there? Brainstorm the different churches, established, new, formal, informal, in purpose-built premises, renting or in homes. What are some of the differences between these different churches in belief, worship styles, and culture?*

I hope you’ve discovered, perhaps even in a rural setting, that churches present very different perspectives and that these perspectives may be cultural (the ages of members, country of origin), theology, issues about governance and authority and spirituality (hymns, songs, incense and bells!). It’s good to step back and recognise this ourselves before we approach people of other faiths. Inevitably, there will be huge differences between Muslims that are dependent on a whole host of factors. As with Christians, there will be some core perspectives and beliefs but we must beware of putting Muslims in a one-size-fits-all jacket.

**REFLECTION:**

This makes evangelism and dialogue more challenging but also more interesting! We won’t know quite what we’re dealing with until we have entered into some kind of relationship. At the end of the day, this is true of all people: we are all unique and products of complex decisions, influences and histories. Our task as followers of Christ, is to model Jesus’ pattern of stepping into the lives and stories of others. In essence, all our relationships are dialogues where we are called to listen and stand in the shoes of someone else as we speak and share our own story.

**Questions and Objections Concerning Christian Practice**

Here are some common questions that Muslims pose to Christians with some suggested responses. If you have time, discuss how you might respond to these objections:

a. “**Why do you eat pork which is unclean?**”

The Jews were taught that pork was unclean. People today think that this was partly because of hygiene, but it was also a sign that they were God’s special people. Jesus, however, taught that cleanliness and uncleanness in God’s eyes are more a matter of what goes on secretly in our hearts than what we eat or don’t eat.
4. Evangelism or Dialogue

b. “Why do you drink alcohol?”
There is no command in the tawrat (the Torah) to refrain from drinking alcohol. We are taught in the gospels that Jesus did drink wine and as there is no law on the subject, we are free to follow the teaching of Jesus which is to practice self-control and be careful stewards of what God has given us. All Christians would say that it is wrong to be drunk; some choose voluntarily not to drink alcohol, but many other feel free to drink in moderation.

c. “Why do you believe in the Trinity? Do you believe in three gods?”
We don’t believe in three gods! We believe in one God as strongly as any Muslim. When we speak of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, we are not thinking of three separate and distinct gods. We don’t believe that Jesus was God’s “son” in a physical sense but that Jesus was the image of God: the very likeness of God on earth. Basically, when you see Jesus, you see God.

d. “We recognise Jesus as a prophet. Why don’t you recognise Muhammad as a prophet?”
If we did recognise Muhammad as a prophet in the way that you do, we would be Muslims. We are glad to accept the teaching of the Qur’an about the One true God which we also find in our Scriptures. But we cannot believe the whole Qur’an because its teaching is different at certain points from the teaching in our Scriptures.

4.3 DID YOU KNOW? Samaritans and Muslims – A Parallel

Colin Chapman noticed that there is an important lesson available to us in the Gospels when we consider the relationship of Samaritans to Jews. The Samaritans were the product of a series of invasions into the eastern kingdom of Israel from Assyria, forcing inter-marriage and bringing with them some of their cultural and religious baggage. Samaritans shared some of the beliefs of Jews, following the first five books of the Hebrew Bible and having a hope in a Messiah that would come and rescue them from their enemies. The Samaritans also had a temple but this was not in Jerusalem because David and his line were not part of their story, but on Mount Gerazim.

The historian Josephus writes of a group of Jewish pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem through Samaria being massacred by Samaritans. As we see in the life of Jesus, any Jew from Galilee would have to negotiate a hazardous journey through hostile Samaritan villages if they wished to take the shorter, direct route. There are accounts too of mutual atrocities in the respective temples as the neighbours expressed their antipathies to each other. Basically, there was a heady cocktail of religious, cultural, ethnic and political rivalry made all the more sharp by the familiarity of these “cousins”. Underlying it all was the subjection of both Jew and Samaritan to a pagan Roman Empire that held the reigns of power as an occupying force.

I hope it sounds familiar to us as we consider Christians and Muslims in a world that is all too often dictated by the powerful forces of secular materialism.

Q1 - Consider the story of the Good Samaritan. As a group, describe the parable but instead of the word, “Samaritan”, use the word “Muslim”. Imagine the Teacher of the Law and the Levite who walk on the other side of the road as vicar/pastor and worship leader. What is your reaction to the story now and what may we learn from it as Christians?
REFLECTION:

I grew up in a Christian home and this parable, like Daniel in the Lion’s Den or Noah’s Ark is one of the staple Bible stories we learn. I do wonder whether I had ever truly understood what Jesus was saying in the parable. The common message that is communicated is “Be nice to people like you”. It’s a good enough ethic for us to take on board but that is not what the story tells us. The person “not like us” was the one that demonstrated love! That is the scandalous sting in the tail of the parable. Jesus seems to be warning the teacher in the law not to get so observed with who is “in” or “out”, so rigidly fixed on the internal aspects of worship that he misses the neighbour. This warning is underlined by the jolt that even his enemy may turn out to be a better neighbour, and be doing God’s will! I believe the Parable of the Good Samaritan is Jesus’ reminder to us to stay humble and hopeful; to watch for God’s grace in Muslims, and all people.

4.4 BIBLE READING - John 4: 1-42

Another famous story of Jesus relating to the Jewish-Samaritan conflict is the account of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. You can pick up some of the points of contention about the respective temples (v.20) and the nature of the hoped for Messiah (v.25). What is most striking, though, is the context of the discussion they have. The woman is drawing water from the well at midday, a time when no self-respecting person is out and about in the sun. She is alone either because of her own choice or because she is excluded by the village. The Samaritan woman’s colourful domestic arrangements suggest that she was not a good person to be around if you wanted to retain your reputation!

Yet here is this Jewish rabbi, having come away from Jerusalem because the religious authorities are beginning to put him under the microscope, talking to her. What is his opening gambit? “Will you give me a drink?” In many Eastern cultures, the rules of hospitality are the reverse of Western tradition. To demonstrate your warmth and generosity to someone, you have to turn up on the doorstep and subject yourself to their hospitality. By doing this, you are acknowledging that person’s worth and status. This is why it was such a big deal that the Jews did not share the same plates as the Samaritans: by doing so, they were saying that the Samaritans were “ok”, and they patently weren’t.

Jesus challenges this directly in that very simple request. It was the same with Zacchaeus the tax collector: “Zacchaeus, I’m coming to your house for tea” in front of a crowd of people who thought Zak was the lowest of the low was deeply subversive of the norms of the day!

Jesus took a risk and was vulnerable. Jesus began with his own humanity (tired and thirsty), and that was the basis for his sharing of the gift of living water with the woman and for good news transforming the whole village. Jesus didn’t shirk the challenge of making clear where the source of life came from. He roots the hopes of the Samaritan woman in the hopes of Israel and its covenant with God that is now available to all people. It’s a story of evangelism, and the sudden commissioning of a new evangelist, but it’s a story of how we need to be in dialogue: humble, listening, affirming, willing to be a guest as well as a host. Notice too that Jesus knew about the woman’s beliefs; her hopes, her heart-cries. How much effort do we make to learn about the belief systems of others? Jesus showed us what God himself is like, and the model for our own lives in relationship and mission.
4. Evangelism or Dialogue

Challenge for discussion: *Lots of our church mission strategies are about “us” doing stuff to “them”, bringing them into “here” from “there”: how might we be able to do mission that allows for us to go, listen, learn and be guests as well as to challenge?*

4.5 GO AND DO

Commit to meeting with a friend this week and asking them what they believe about the purpose of life. The agenda is to listen; you may have an opportunity to share what you believe but make a special effort to find out what the hopes and fears are in a friend’s life. It’s often by giving people the dignity of affirming their story, their own worth, that we gain the right to share our story. Pray for them that they might discover the living water of Jesus.
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SESSION 5 – EXTREMISM: REASONS TO BE FEARFUL?

Aim: To learn about some of the roots of Islamic extremism and reflect on an appropriate Christian response.

5.1 BACKGROUND INFO:

Muslims in Britain

In the 2001 British census, the first, incidentally, that measured religion, the breakdown of faiths looked like this:

- Christianity – 71.6%
- No religion/not stated – 23%
- Muslim – 2.7%
- Hindu – 1%
- Sikh – 0.6%
- Jewish – 0.5%
- Buddhist – 0.3%
- Other religion – 0.3%

(Figures from "Muslim Britain: Communities under Pressure", edited by Tahir Abbas)

It’s probably surprising to see the percentage of Christians as high as 71%. By 2007, it is estimated that around 9% of the British population regularly attend church. This is a reminder that a significant number of people still hold a general connection with the Christian faith though belief and practice may depart from their cultural connection to the faith. By 2008, the Muslim population will be in excess of 3% of the population as it is a young and growing community with a comparatively high birth rate. It is worth noting that the Muslim population, despite all the media attention, is not huge and its growth is largely “natural” growth as opposed to being due to conversions.

In 2001, a number of additional characteristics of the Muslim population can be noted:

a. The Muslim population is the youngest of all religious groups in England and Wales (one third of the Muslim population is less than 15 years of age)

b. Over 40% of the Muslim population left full time education with no qualifications whatsoever

c. The Muslim population has the lowest proportion of people in the top three professions of any religious group

d. 10% of the prison population is Muslim: proportionately the highest religious grouping represented in British prisons

Just these headline figures are a reminder of some of the social needs within the Muslim population in Britain and the potential for them to feel alienated from the rest of society. Looking at these brief statistics, how might the church serve and bless Muslims in Britain?
5.2 WARM-UP AND DISCUSS: Word Association

*Be honest in this exercise and provide your “gut” response rather than what you may feel is the ‘right’ or ‘proper’ response:*

- As individuals, what words immediately spring to mind when someone says “Muslim”?
- what impressions and feelings do you have when you meet a Muslim woman who is veiled or a photograph or film of a veiled Muslim woman?

**REFLECTION:**

I wonder what reactions your group gave and how uneasy it made you feel. Whenever we encounter something that we do not understand, the very human tendency to fear can come to the fore. Words like “terrorist” may not be far beneath the surface when we think about Islam, especially with some of the terrifying news stories of recent years. As Christians, though, we must never forget the human beings, the individuals and families of Islam, the vast majority of whom work, play, study, have concerns for their children and seek to live peacefully.

We’ve already seen how diverse Islam is. Just noting the large number of supposed “Christians” in the 2001 census might be a nudge to think about how many Muslims, particularly the huge numbers of young people, from second and third generation Muslim immigrant families, mix their faith with the ordinary concerns of other British youth. “Muslim” will mean different things to lots of different people. It’s so easy to judge from appearances too. Many Muslim women who wear the veil, wear it as a sign of defiance, often politically, to make a statement about how empowered they are as Muslims and to assert Muslim respect for propriety in sexual relations. This is arguably a challenge to a British society that too often objectifies women’s bodies.

If I were to do the reverse word association with a group of Muslims, giving them the word “Christian”, I suspect some of the following responses would be heard: *America, the Crusades, the West*. Even though the vast majority of Christians globally now live in Africa and South America, many Muslims associate the Christian faith with colonialism, with a Christian American Presidency and with a long history of persecution of Muslims. Perhaps the greatest challenge for Christians is to demonstrate to Muslims that we love them and that the Christian faith is distinct from the political agendas of our nations.

5.3 DID YOU KNOW? Tales from history and around the globe

Muslims feel a deep sense of connection to fellow Muslims around the world. This global community is known as the *ummah* in Arabic and though there may be huge differences politically, culturally and theologically within Islam, when Muslims feel under threat from outside, there is a hurt and humiliation felt by all Muslims. A calendar of flashpoints for Muslim self-understanding in the 21st century is helpful in shedding light on the pressures leading some Muslims to extremist terrorism:

1492 – The defeat of Muslims in Europe by Emperor Charlemagne: the high-point of Muslim culture, technology and political power began to unravel and Muslims driven from southern Europe
5. Extremism

1918 – End of the Ottoman Empire: the defeat of the Turks in World War I signalled the end of the last Muslim empire and the pre-eminence of the West

1947 – State of Pakistan established

1948 – State of Israel established

1979 – Iranian Revolution: following the OPEC oil crisis in the early 1970's, Muslim countries begin to grow in confidence and wealth and a western style government is overthrown by conservative religious forces in Iran

1989 – *The Satanic Verses* published: Salman Rushdie’s book, blaspheming against Muhammad, creates uproar in Muslim communities in Britain and a *fatwa* is pronounced on the author, forcing him into hiding. The sight of book-burning in Britain outrages the secular establishment and the incomprehension that British-born Muslims could react in such a way.

1990 – First Gulf War

1993-1996 – Bosnian genocide: Muslims in Britain witness TV coverage of white European Muslims being massacred and raped by white Christian Europeans

2001 – Bradford, Burnley and Oldham riots

2001 – 9/11 attacks

2003 – Second Gulf War

2007 – 7th July bombings in London

More dates could be added, such as the Six Day War in 1967 when Israel took the West Bank and Gaza from the Palestinians, but what this list suggests is the feeling of humiliation that many Muslims have on the global stage and the sense of being targeted for abuse by rich Western nations. We might wish to argue against the truthfulness of these sentiments and remind Muslims how Western governments came to the assistance of Bosnian Muslims, for example. However, the point is that many Muslims feel these humiliations deeply. When a war on terror is termed a 'crusade', lots of other buttons are pressed that add to the alienation of Muslims.

Traditionally in Islam, the example of Muhammad’s life when he emigrated from Mecca to Medina on the invitation of a city that were calling him to implement his message by being the ruler of Medina is to be followed. The emigration is known as the *Hijra* and it suggests that the place of mature Islamic presence is when all the laws and practices of Islam can be fully implemented. This is the core dilemma for many Muslims: how can someone be a faithful Muslim whilst living in a non-Muslim environment? For most Muslims, this is not an issue; they are busy getting on with their lives. But the humiliations of recent history and the possibilities of Islamic resurgence coupled with the traditional Islamic model are what combine to push some Muslims into extremism.

Q1 - Some scholars have suggested that the ‘Hijra’, Muhammad’s shift from being a minority presence to being politically dominant, is the crucial event of Islam in the same way that the cross is the crucial event of the Christian faith. Do you agree with this? If you do, then how do you think this should change a Christian’s attitude to power and where might the church have failed in this regard in history?
REFLECTION:

There is an incredible amount of baggage blocking good understanding between Christians and Muslims. The baggage is often stuff from history but the world as it is today makes it difficult for Christians to be truly heard by Muslims. It’s tragic that the central message of the Christian faith: the sacrificial love of God demonstrated by Jesus’ death on the cross is not what is perceived by most Muslims when they think of the Christian faith. The challenge, then, to the church, is to demonstrate unconditional love, something of Jesus’ love and that the barriers can be torn down and Muslims encounter the heart of the Christian good news. In one sense, our actions will speak volumes and we must learn to speak plainly and truthfully about Jesus and the hope we have as Christians having earned the right through committed relationships with Muslims.

The church’s own mixed history with Muslims is a stern reminder to us to be humble, too. Christians have something worth sharing, have discovered the truth of who Jesus is, but we carry still with us our own sin and brokenness. As we consider the extremism of some Muslims, we must never forget the extremism that exists, the horrors that have been perpetrated, in the name of the church.

5.4 BIBLE READING – Luke 9: 51-56

This is a less well-known story involving Samaritans. This time, Jesus is heading towards Jerusalem, his focus clearly on the ultimate destiny of the cross. Having to travel through Samaria, some of his disciples go on ahead to ask permission for their “rabbi” to travel through. The Jewish historian Josephus, writing shortly after Jesus’ ministry, tells of a group of Jewish pilgrims being massacred when they travelled through Samaria. The context was fragile, explosive and tense. This brief story reveals that the Samaritans didn’t want this Jewish rabbi Jesus around them and gave the disciples short shrift.

James and John’s reaction, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” seems bizarre to us from our vantage point. When we are removed from the culture and context of the Bible, it’s easy for the disciples to appear like buffoons and miss the impact of scripture. Look back in your Bibles for a few moments though. Where had the disciples been recently with Jesus and how had they seen their rabbi? Back in John 9, Jesus had been transfigured on a mountaintop, a glimpse of the full glory of who Jesus was. The disciples had seen Jesus shining brightly with Moses and Elijah on either side of him. Notice Moses, symbol of the Law, of the liberation from the pagan Pharaoh. Notice Elijah, symbol of the prophets, slayer of the false prophets of Baal.

The disciples had had a peek into the full potential of Jesus, what power he had at his disposal, what authority he was ministering. Facing the belittling rejection, insult and inhospitality of the Samaritans, surely the village needed confronting with their error and God’s judgment to be visited upon them?

Look even further back at 2 Kings chapter 1 and you see Elijah literally calling fire down from heaven on the soldiers of the King of Samaria after he had consulted false prophets rather than the true prophet of God. I wonder whether James and John thought that they were being faithful, Bible-based followers of Jesus but had somehow missed the heart of the Father God. Jesus rebukes them and so they take the long route around the village.
5. Extremism

We may be “right”, have the privilege of knowing God intimately, yet can still miss the way of Jesus when we forget our own weakness and dependency upon him.

Challenge for discussion:
*Think through the mission of your local church. It’s not just Muslims who have “baggage” with Christians in society today. Many, many people see alternative agendas, arrogance and hypocrisy in the church. How do we “do evangelism” in such a way as to own up to our weakness, our struggles yet clearly points to Jesus? What “long way round” might we have to endure to stay faithful to Jesus?*

5.5 GO AND DO

Part of our humility in mission needs to be the regular practice of confession in the church: to recall and ask forgiveness for our failures in society. Take some time to confess the failures of your church and the church globally in its mission and perhaps in relation to Islam. For some of us, we may not even be aware of how people perceive the church. Commit this week to asking several friends and neighbours how they see the church and bring back those reflections to your house group. How can you move on from the mistakes of the past, committed to sharing the life of Jesus with integrity?