

CHRISTIANITY
A L O N G S I D E

ISLAM

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Cover photograph: After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, government and civic leaders feared a backlash of prejudice, even violence, against all Muslims living in their midst. Melbourne's Anglican Archbishop Peter Watson took the initiative in October to visit Melbourne's largest mosque in the suburb of Preston. Here he stands in silent prayer beside leading Muslim Sheik Fehmi in the mosque. 'Where others build walls of hostility and hate, our task is to create bridges of understanding and friendship.' Photograph by Alan Nichols AM.

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Foreword

The Need to Study Islam

Prior to the terrorist attacks in the United States of September 11, 2001, Westerners who specialised in the study of Islam were unlikely to attract much interest when they chatted about their work in social settings. However, that one terrible day forever changed Western perceptions of, and interest in, the world of Islam. Almost ten years on, the attention to Islam in the Western media, education systems, and public discourse continues to increase steadily. Simply put, Islam is one of the hottest topics in the West today.

But Islam is no simple, monolithic concept. It is a faith, to be sure, but it is much more than that. Muslim scholars themselves have long pointed out that Islam is at once a religious system, a complex set of laws, a political ideology, a set of economic processes, a means of social organisation and more. In essence, Islam is the total package according to Muslim scholarly writings down the ages. Islam provides a detailed blueprint for the lives of the Muslim faithful.

With such breadth, clearly any study of Islam is a challenging process. A serious student has much to learn about religious doctrine, the history and scriptures of the faith, Islamic law, Islamic economics, and so forth. Islam cannot be reduced to a set of trite statements about belief and ritual, holy war and women's rights. It is a highly complex and detailed system of doctrine and practice.

Moreover, the complexity of the system of Islam is compounded by the diversity of the people who follow the faith. Muslims can be divided in a myriad of ways, according to geography, ethnicity, nationality, sectarian difference, legal school, view of sacred scriptures, and so forth. One should be wary of anybody who says 'Muslims think' or 'Muslims believe' ... because in fact Muslims think and believe in diverse ways.

Yet, such detail should not dissuade non-Muslims from studying Islam. There have clearly been points of tension and discomfort between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in recent years, exacerbated by the actions of certain individuals and small groups. Such tensions are likely to continue for quite some time, and may well worsen in the years ahead. At the same time, there will be areas of bridge-building and cooperation between Muslims and non-Muslims

that serve to somewhat counter-balance the areas of difficulty. Greater awareness can help to ensure that the positives outweigh the negatives in the connection between the West and Islam.

If the Islam–West relationship is fragile in certain ways, the same can clearly be said for the Islam–Christianity relationship. Both are missionary faiths, but this shared characteristic will always be more a cause of rivalry than cooperation. If the Church is flourishing in certain parts of the world – Asia, Africa and Latin America – the same cannot be said where the Church exists in majority Muslim locations. Christian–Muslim relations in the Muslim world are typically fraught and need a lot of attention and hard work.

So if Westerners and Christians – not synonymous terms – are to grapple with the faith of Islam, they cannot do so from a base of ignorance. Study is important, in order to learn about both the areas of difficulty and the areas of shared values. Study helps to break down simplistic stereotypes; it also helps to build bridges and assists in understanding one’s competitors.

Not everyone has the time to attend formal courses in the study of Islam, such as those that are emerging in universities and theological colleges around the world. The alternative is to read books – not just any books, but those books that are both accurate in their detail and accessible in their writing style.

Dr John Wilson’s *Christianity alongside Islam* is such a book. Dr Wilson succeeds in digesting a vast amount of information about both Christianity and Islam and presenting it in a way that is very accessible to non-specialist readers. The approach of concurrent discussion of Christianity and Islam according to particular themes and topics ensures that the reader finds answers to key questions such as ‘How does the Islamic view of “X” affect me as a Christian?’ The book is comprehensive in detail but very readable in style.

This book will undoubtedly assist the urgent task of informing Christians and non-Christian Westerners about Islam. In this way, readers will be equipped to engage with some of the most pressing issues facing the Church and the world in the years ahead.

Peter Riddell

Professorial Dean

Centre for the Study of Islam and Other Faiths

Bible College of Victoria

Australian College of Theology

Preface

The genesis of this book goes back to the Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops held at the University of Kent in July–August 1998. I was placed in a small group which included leaders from northern Nigeria, Uganda and south-east Asia, all of whom spoke of the pressure, even persecution, that their churches were experiencing from Muslim extremists. The Conference had among its many expert consultants the west African historian Professor Lamin Sanneh and Colin Chapman, widely known for his books on the Muslim Middle East. At the same time I was becoming aware of the major issues arising from the inner-city concentration of Muslim immigrant groups in some British cities. I returned to Australia determined to learn more about Islam. I was convinced that in the future Christian–Muslim relations were going to be much more important than some of the other topics of the Conference which had attracted the attention of the media.

Then came 9/11 and a whole series of terrorist attacks which catapulted Islam into the headlines. Today Western countries are at war in two strongly Muslim countries.

Two opposite responses have been common. One is to condemn all things Muslim out of hand. The other is to be so muted in any criticism as if to indicate that there are no deep issues to be faced by Muslims. Governments have often adopted the second approach as they try to encourage tolerance and multiculturalism. They are also subject to intimidation, of which the massive and violent overreactions to the Danish cartoons of Muhammad and the Pope's Regensburg address are some of the most frightening examples.

Neither approach will help in the long run.

Into this mix has come the idea that all religions are essentially the same and that their differences do not matter. Some see nothing good in any religion. It has even been claimed that 'religion poisons everything', so the aim should be to eliminate it altogether. A new form of aggressive intolerance of all things religious is in the making, which, quite frankly, is unlikely to help anyone. Paradoxically,

however, Jesus remains a most admired figure of history, even if many know less and less about him.

I began speaking to groups on such topics as 'Jesus in the Qur'an and in the Bible', 'Christian and Islamic beliefs about God', and 'Comparing the Bible to the Qur'an'. There was great interest, but I soon realised that it was quite inadequate to confine myself to this narrow range of topics. The influence of Jesus and Muhammad has impacted every sphere of life. Islam claims to be a total way of life and sees this personified in Muhammad himself. Christianity concerns itself no less, if differently, with the whole of life, with communities as well as with individuals. I began to realise that Islam may even assist Christians to recover a more holistic vision of their own faith.

So I broadened my approach to include such topics as human rights, politics, violence and peacemaking, and even science. This enabled me to address important questions raised by those who either work to marginalise religion or eliminate it altogether. I aimed to provide in a fair and objective manner a basic understanding of both Christianity and Islam in a way that explains where they are similar and where they differ. Hence the title, *Christianity alongside Islam*.

However, mere description is not enough for the urgent needs of the world today. Muslims must be challenged to confront honestly the more difficult questions and the hard issues, for their own sakes and for the world at large. Christians must be challenged to think and act more 'Christianly'. Others need to examine afresh their attitudes and assumptions and where they might lead. We all have important work to do.

Footnotes abound in this book, and they are placed where it is easiest to read them, at the foot of each page. Hopefully they will add interest and value. They will also enable readers to follow up various topics in greater depth. *However, this book has been written for general readers as much as for students and it is possible to read the main text from beginning to end without any necessity to refer to the footnotes at all.*

Experiences and people from many places have gone contributed to this book, including years spent in Papua New Guinea, the US

and the UK, as well as extensive travels in Europe and parts of Asia and Africa. I have been blessed in my teachers at Ridley College, Yale Divinity School, Duke University and Princeton Theological Seminary. These include Stuart Babbage, Francis Ian Andersen, Leon Morris, Brevard Childs, W.D. Davies, Eric Meyers, Moody Smith, Frank Young, Leong Seow and Kenneth Bailey. My attendance at Annual Meetings of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature has also been very significant. I had been privileged to serve under Archbishop David Penman, himself an Islamic scholar. Through him I became friends with Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali. My many dear friends and colleagues have greatly encouraged me. I would especially like to mention Peter and Elizabeth Smart and Archbishop Philip Freier. I am grateful for generous financial assistance from Diana Morgan, Sue Morgan, Ted and Brenda Mouritz and others through the Melbourne Anglican Cultural Organisation.

Maurice Betteridge, Dr Colin Kruse, Professor John Pilbrow and Professor Peter Riddell read all or part of the manuscript and made many useful suggestions to improve it. Its inadequacies remain mine, of course. Michelle Smith has patiently transformed my handwriting into text on the computer. In early days Helen Williams and Elaine Coleman also gave me much-appreciated help in this way. Ian Heyward has prepared maps that genuinely illuminate the text. It is a joy to work with my friends and colleagues of Acorn Press, of whom Dr Kristin Argall has provided the highest standard of editorial care for this particular book. I also want to pay tribute to Acorn Press' Senior Editor, Rena Pritchard.

I thank my family for their love and support. My son-in-law, Andrew Moody, has been of more help than he would know. Special thanks to my wife and closest friend, Jill, whose patience with the piles of books around our house even amazes me.

John W. Wilson
January 2010

CHAPTER ONE

Christianity, Islam and the Future of Western Civilisation

September 11, 2001 (9/11) is a date we will never forget. Images are fixed in our minds of planes flying into the twin towers of the World Trade Center, people throwing themselves from top floors to escape the flames, collapsing buildings, and consuming clouds of smoke and dust moving across the city of New York. It was as transfixing as it was horrifying.

The attacks that day on New York and Washington were the most visually dramatic. However, massive bomb blasts in Kenya, Tanzania, Bali, Madrid, Jakarta, Egypt, London and elsewhere have also left thousands dead and maimed. Many more bomb plots have been foiled or failed, such as the planned attacks on Heathrow, Glasgow and Frankfurt airports. We do not ask *if* it will happen again. Rather, the question is *where* and *when* the terrorists will strike next. Can they be prevented from killing and injuring thousands more? Who are they? What are they aiming to achieve? With ever-increasing security checks, no one who travels can escape constant reminders of these questions.

The major response to 9/11 was President Bush's declaration of the War on Terror. In effect, this has added to the spiral of violence. Afghanistan was invaded in October 2001 to drive the Taliban government from power in an effort to destroy the sanctuary of Osama Bin Laden and the Al Qa'ida organisation responsible for the 9/11 attacks. Because the invasion had wide support in the UN and NATO, many countries contributed troops. The conflict still continues, and it has now spilled over into Pakistan where it threatens the stability of the subcontinent.

With limited international support, the US invaded Iraq in March 2003 with the aims of overthrowing the brutal regime of Saddam Hussein and eliminating ‘the weapons of mass destruction’ which he had previously used against fellow Iraqis, murdering Kurds in the north and Shi’ites in the south, and which he was still believed to possess. After initial victories, the conflict did not go well.

In retrospect, it is clear that US expectations of what their overwhelming firepower could achieve in Iraq were simplistic and ignored the complexities created by history and religion. What attention had those who ordered the invasion paid to Iraq’s tribal and ethnic divisions, as well as the hostility that Saddam Hussein had exacerbated between the Shi’ite majority and Sunni minority Muslim population? Moreover, it is fair to say that the invasion and occupation of Iraq heightened the danger of terrorism elsewhere, as they have been used effectively to recruit suicide bombers and other insurgents.

Meanwhile, these events have put all Muslims under a cloud of suspicion. This has been made worse by the uncovering of ‘homegrown’ Islamist terrorist cells in Western countries. Large numbers of Muslims now live in Britain, western Europe, the US and Australia, where they are welcomed as much-needed workers, immigrants from former colonial territories, or refugees – so much so that Islam is now correctly termed ‘Europe’s Second Religion’.¹

How are Muslims to be integrated into their new contexts? Western countries have been led to expect religion to be of diminishing importance. It has been seen as a declining cultural phenomenon – a part of one’s cultural background but not significant in itself. For many years the governing authorities have not treated religion seriously, regarding it as unimportant to foreign policy and peripheral to peacemaking.²

1 Stephen T. Hunter (ed.), *Islam, Europe’s Second Religion*, Praeger, Westport CT, 2002.

2 See Madeleine Albright, *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on Power, God and World Affairs*, Macmillan, London, 2006; Douglas Johnston & Cynthia Sampson, *Religion, The Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, Oxford University Press, New York/Oxford, 1994. For a splendid overview and commentary on the debates concerning modernisation and secularisation, see Peter Berger, Grace Davie & Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations*, Ashgate, Farnham UK, 2008. See also John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God is Back: How the Global Rise of Faith is Changing the World*, Allen Lane, London, 2009.



Figure 1
Turkish women coming from the market in the city of Berlin.

At the end of World War II in May 1945, Germany was utterly devastated. Ten years later, West Germany was in the midst of an 'economic miracle' and by the early 1960s had severe labour shortages. Large scale Muslim immigration of 'guest workers' began, especially from Turkey. They were soon bringing their families and now there are about 2.5 million Turks in Germany, many of them naturalised.

France has over four million Muslims. The largest numbers have come from Algeria and Morocco. There are many non-Arab Muslims including Turks, Asians, and various asylum seekers and illegal immigrants. In the United Kingdom, large numbers of Muslims have come from Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, but many other countries of origin are represented. In Italy the largest numbers of Muslims have arrived from Morocco and Albania. Figures from other European countries also reveal the huge diversity in the Muslim population of Europe.

Turkish Market, Kreuzberg, Berlin, by fabbio:
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/fabiovenni/2580926354/in/set-72157605604325582/>

Into this context have come adherents of a religious faith that does not easily fit into the reigning secular orthodoxy. Furthermore, they are often highly visible. The vast majority of Muslims are of course peace-loving people, but Islam presents itself as a confident missionary religion which refuses to be sidelined as an aspect of culture. Instead, it sees itself as the shaper of culture.

Those of us in Western democracies are ill-prepared for the impact of Islam in our midst. For one thing, we are increasingly

ignorant of both history and religion. We exist in a multiple-choice world of advertised options – ‘You do your thing and I’ll do mine.’ It is a market economy with an emphasis on products to make life easier and to entertain. Western democracies do not take kindly to creeds that challenge their secular assumptions. Nor are they sure how to deal with them when they seem to pose a threat to the assumed order of things. As a result, there is a huge danger that we will shape our personal attitudes and our public policies largely on the basis of ignorance and prejudice.³

To the shock and shame of many Australians, race riots took place in Sydney in 2005. These riots arose out of beachside tensions between those who thought of themselves as ‘real Aussies’ and Lebanese Muslim youths. Fortunately they have not been repeated. They did, however, follow days of rioting by Muslim youths in Paris and they led to a lot of soul-searching. Such happenings are against ‘Aussie values’. However, what are Australian values? On what are they based? Are they part of Australia’s Christian heritage, as some have claimed?

Questions of identity and of assumed common values have become important across the Western world. They came to the fore in Britain after the London bombings. ‘Who are we?’ asked Samuel Huntington, referring to the US. It is the kind of question that Australians have also been asking. To a large extent, and certainly in Australia, the increasing profile of Islam has forced this question upon us.⁴

So what about Christianity? What role has it had in shaping our values and our civilisation? Postmodern attitudes have led to a neglect of history, but how can we possibly understand the present

3 Australian journalist Peter Day states, ‘It should be clear that excessive fear of Islamophobia is a poor foundation for the development of public policy in any field. And it is an especially poor foundation for the development of the sound knowledge bases – whether they are in human rights or national security – on which sound policy ultimately depends’ (David Claydon (ed.), *Islam, Human Rights and Public Policy*, Acorn Press, Melbourne, 2009, p. 27).

4 Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? America’s Great Debate*, Free Press, London, 2004. On Australian values and Christianity, see John Harrower, ‘Religious Policy, Multi-Faith Dialogue and Australian Values’, in Claydon, *Islam, Human Rights and Public Policy*, pp. 241–252; Stuart Piggin (ed.), *Shaping the Good Society in Australia*, Australia’s Christian Heritage National Forum (ACHNF), Macquarie Centre NSW, 2006.

without a knowledge of the past? How can we possibly understand Western civilisation and its contemporary dilemmas without at least some nuanced knowledge of what Christianity is all about? Our heritage did not begin with the personal computer and the mobile phone! Parliamentary democracy and our huge network of charitable organisations did not suddenly appear out of a vacuum.

In the UK census of 2001, 72 per cent of the British population still claimed to be Christians. In the 2006 Australian census it was 63.9 per cent of the population. In spite of such figures, Christianity has been marginalised. Much of Western Europe is considered to be only nominally Christian. France has an aggressive secular tradition. What has happened in these countries? Is journalist Melanie Phillips correct in stating that the sidelining of the Christian heritage threatens the future of British culture which is based upon it? Without the Christian anchor, is the moral compass left spinning? Is it true, as she claims, that Islamist extremism and terrorism will be repulsed in the UK only if Britain once again regains the confidence of its own culture, heritage and traditions, which are based on Christianity?⁵

Many would place the blame on the churches. They are accused of being either too conservative or too liberal in their teachings; they are either too traditionalist or too radical in the forms of worship; they either deal with irrelevancies or they are so concerned with secular issues that the spiritual message has been lost. There have been scandals of sexual abuse that have preoccupied the churches and the media. Some claim the churches have not delivered what is needed in contemporary society. Others, however, would argue that Christianity has not been tried and found lacking; it has been found difficult, and not tried. It is out of step with where our society is heading.

There are other factors also at work in the marginalisation of Christianity.

The secular society generally operates without regard for religion, which is considered to be a personal and private matter. Religion is

5 Melanie Phillips, *Londonistan: How Britain Has Created a Terror State Within*, rev. edn, Gibson Square, London, 2008, pp. xv–xvi, 319–320.

treated with suspicion when it raises its voice in the public forum. Yet one's inner spirituality is the source of motivation, moral strength and social vision, and it needs to be nurtured. Have we therefore been fast using up our remaining spiritual capital? In his 2009 BBC Reith Lectures, Professor Michael Sandel of Harvard University has argued that the avoidance of the moral and religious dimensions in debates over contentious issues – for example, climate change, same-sex marriages and biotechnology – in favour of so-called objective market-measured criteria fails to provide solutions and harms civil society.⁶

In recent decades, we've come to assume that respecting our fellow citizens' moral and religious convictions means ignoring them (for political purposes, at least), leaving them undisturbed, and conducting our public life – in so far as possible – without reference to them. But this stance of avoidance can make for a spurious respect. Often, it means suppressing moral disagreement rather than actually avoiding it. This can provoke backlash and resentment. It can also make for an impoverished public discourse, lurching from one news cycle to the next, preoccupied with the scandalous, the sensational, and the trivial.⁷

Many secularists regard all religions as essentially the same – 'all are equal and deserve the same respect' (or disrespect). It is like choosing between Ford and Toyota or between McDonald's and KFC – it becomes a matter of personal preference. Christians have been expected to be content to merge into a multi-faith religious context, as though what makes Christianity distinctive is of little importance. For example, it has been suggested that the British sovereign should be called the defender of *faith* rather than the defender of the Faith.⁸ Such ideas confuse, and they obscure the

6 Michael Sandel, 'A New Citizenship', 2009 Reith Lecture Series, ABC Radio National, 28 June 2009, viewed 5 January 2010, <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/bigideas/stories/2009/2609699.htm>.

7 Michael J. Sandel, BBC Radio 4 Reith Lecturer 2009, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*, Allen Lane, London/New York, 2009, p. 268.

8 The idea that 'Defender of Faith' should be substituted for 'Defender of the Faith' with regard to the British monarchy is carefully documented in Peter G. Riddell, *Christians and Muslims: Pressures and Potential in a Post-9/11 World*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester UK, 2004, pp. 112–115. Also documented are the extensive interest and favourable perspectives in Islam expressed by H.R.H. Prince Charles.

Christian belief that it is *the truth* which makes us free.⁹ Moreover, it makes it harder to discern what is good or bad in various religions. The truth will make us free, but not half-truths and bland misrepresentations, however well intended.

If such confusion were advocated in the sphere of politics, it would be seen as both dangerous and ridiculous. Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama are all names of political leaders. However, we do not equate one with the other because they are politicians. We know that philosophies, policies and actions make a difference. Nor do we pretend that political leadership is no longer necessary because of the monstrous regimes that have existed in the past. Religion can no more be eliminated from human life than politics can. In both areas we need to discern between what is good and better, and what will bring with it corruption and misery.

Faith, therefore, must always be judged by the worth of that to which it is directed. Faith is always in someone or something. There is a great deal of difference between faith in crystals or black magic and faith in God. The faith that led Mother Teresa to care for the dying on the streets of Calcutta had a very different basis to that which led members of the Aum sect to release deadly sarin gas in Tokyo's subway system in 1995. It was a kind of faith in Bernard Madoff that enabled him to swindle investors of over US \$50 billion.

Also working to marginalise Christianity are the strong voices attempting to eliminate Christian festivals and symbols from the public domain. Easter becomes a time for eggs and rabbits, and Christmas a time for pagan festivities. In Britain the Post Office has issued stamp designs with Santa, snowmen and even icicles to celebrate Christmas. In Australia, Christmas carol services have been disallowed in some public places, supposedly not to offend people of other religions. They are much more likely to offend people who reject religion, but in any case people are being cut off from meaning-filled traditions. Nothing, it seems, must

⁹ John 8:32.

be allowed to hinder the complete commercialisation of all the festivities listed on the calendar.¹⁰

Christianity is also written out of modern history. It is as though the faith that has motivated millions and has impacted on every corner of the world is unimportant. The exceptions that are usually highlighted are the negatives such as Northern Ireland, which is seen as a religious conflict. Where religion enters the narrative, it is generally associated with disunity and violence rather than being presented as a force for peace and harmony.¹¹

In Western countries and almost everywhere in the world, the Christian churches are still massively involved in community care, medical and relief work, education and so on. Those writers known as ‘the new atheists’ seem to pay little attention to the social capital provided by the churches in generating and sustaining activities for the common good. This is not simply a matter of the countless explicitly Christian groups; there are also vast numbers of Christian volunteers at work in other organisations. What

10 Berger *et al.*, *Religious America, Secular Europe?*, comment with regard to the UK: ‘The notion ... that specifically Christian festivals offend minorities from other faith communities is widespread – but it is rarely the view of the minorities themselves, who (equally rarely) are asked for their opinion. This could in fact be called the “battering ram” approach to policy making: secular elites make use of other faith communities in order to further their own – frequently secular – points of view’ (p. 65). Examples are provided.

11 One example of the Christian dimension of history being downplayed is the brilliant book on Abraham Lincoln and his cabinet by Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2005. The reference to Lincoln’s religious faith on p. 131 is slight in the extreme, yet Lincoln’s speeches are steeped in the Bible and even theological reflection. Another example is the recent historical novel by Australian author Kate Grenville, *The Lieutenant*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2008, inspired by William Dawes and the Aboriginal people he befriended. Dawes (1762–1836) was a marine officer, scientist and linguist who came to New South Wales in 1789 with the First Fleet. He was ordered back to England in 1791, most notably for refusing to agree with Governor Phillip’s orders with regard to a punitive expedition against the Aborigines. Dawes had deeply held Christian convictions that led him to involvement with William Wilberforce and the anti-slavery movement while he was governor of Sierra Leone and later as an educationalist in the West Indies. Kate Grenville has said on radio more than once that she left religious faith out of the story because modern readers would not understand it and, in any case, she had written a novel. Yet how is it possible to understand Lieutenant Dawes without understanding what made him the person he was? And no matter what Kate Grenville says, her novel will be read as a kind of history, which her note at the end of the book suggests it is. For comments on Grenville’s other fiction based on the early history of New South Wales, see Grace Karskens, *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW, 2009, pp. 12–14. Dawes appears at various points in her narrative. On Dawes see also *ADB*, vol. I, pp. 297–298.

would happen if the sources for such charitable involvement were to dry up?¹²

Finally, we should note the growing ignorance about the content of the Christian faith in the community at large. The normative traditional teachings of what may be called the Church Catholic or Universal (that is, all the major Christian denominations) are neglected. Instead, bookshops and television programs promote sensational ‘discoveries’ about Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls, Mary Magdalene and the bloodline of the Messiah, and so on. When it comes to religion, ignorance is even thought commendable.¹³ As a result, the media miss out on some of the greatest stories of our time and fail to engage with some of the deepest questions of human life.¹⁴

12 Corwin Smidt (ed.), *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good*, Baylor University Press, Waco TX, 2003. The positive contribution of the Christian churches to community wellbeing is illustrated, for example, by their efforts in just one area of outer Melbourne. Apart from massive participation in the provision of education at every level, their work includes the provision of food and support for the needy and homeless, breakfast programs for children, parenting education and support, playgroups for mothers with young children, foster care, financial counselling, English teaching and other assistance for refugees, youth clubs, grief counselling, care for bushfire victims, homework clubs and mentoring for children, bullying prevention and peace building, gift boxes to assist overseas children, medical and hospital care, and so on. These efforts do not discriminate between members and non-members. The local churches provide the most widespread social and support networks for individuals and families. Mosques also serve as centres for social and welfare networking.

13 The axing by the ABC of its *Religion Report* was suitably labelled part of a ‘dumbing-down’ in Australia’s national broadcasting. Former specialist religious broadcasters have commented ‘It is not that the ABC management is anti-religious. It is just that it’s convinced that you don’t have to know anything about religion to cover it.’ See the letter by former religion editors for the ABC in *The Melbourne Anglican*, February 2009. Other comments are found for example in the *Weekend Australian*, October 25–26, 2008.

14 For the common failure of the media to understand the significance of religion in interpreting current events, see Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert & Roberta Green Ahmanson (eds), *Blind Spot: When Journalists Don’t Get Religion*, Oxford University Press, New York/Oxford, 2009. Note the comments of veteran journalist and US public policy adviser, Michael J. Gerson on pp. xviii–xix.

The failure of many without religious convictions to discuss deeper questions of life is illustrated by a haunting passage in Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk’s memoir of growing up in a middle-class, very secular Turkish family: ‘The spiritual void I have seen in so many of Istanbul’s rich, Westernised, secularist families is evident in [their] silences. Everyone talks openly about mathematics, success at school, football and having fun, but they grapple with the most basic questions of existence – love, compassion, religion, the meaning of life, jealousy, hatred – in trembling confusion and painful solitude. They light a cigarette, give their attention to the music on the radio, return wordlessly to their inner worlds’ (O. Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memoirs of a City*, Faber & Faber, London, 2005).

Symbolic of the idea that you don't have to know anything about religion to cover it is the 1994 *Washington Post* in-house recruitment notice for a 'religion reporter'. It stated that the ideal candidate is not necessarily religious or 'an expert on religion'! It is fair enough that the reporter need not be an adherent to a particular religion, but to state that such a reporter for one of world's greatest newspapers need not have demonstrable expertise in the area to be covered almost turns ignorance into a virtue. Would there be the same attitude in the coverage of economics or legal matters? Hopefully the *Washington Post* has received its own education in religious issues since then.¹⁵

Dan Brown's fictional *Da Vinci Code* for a while assumed notoriety and self-importance as a source of church history. Yet no one could possibly gain any intelligent understanding of Christianity by reading this novel. To think otherwise is to delude oneself. Some light fictional entertainment may not seem to do much harm, but the cost is great if it becomes a substitute for engagement with the real thing. The sad fact is that in many general bookshops it is hard to find trustworthy introductions to the Bible and the Christian faith because of all the money-making nonsense on display. At least it is still easy to purchase a copy of the Bible!

Ignorance is not going to help us through the present crisis, nor will it help us build a better world and better lives. One of the aims of this book is to explore the many questions that have been raised in this chapter. It is written with the conviction that no person should count themselves as educated without a basic understanding of the core teachings of both Christianity and Islam. It sets out to explain these as objectively and as fairly as possible. The pattern followed in each chapter is to begin the discussion with Muhammad and Islam and then follow with Jesus and Christianity.

15 See the chapter by Terry Mattingly in Marshall *et al.*, *Blind Spot*, pp. 145–158. On the *Washington Post* recruitment, see p. 157. A senior journalist commented recently to this author regarding the policies of one of Australia's leading newspapers that, when it came to religion, all that interests them is 'scandals and conflicts [within the churches]'. Scandals and conflicts presumably are reckoned to sell newspapers, but if that is all that is reported, which is all too often the case, the media have become purveyors of prejudice and ignorance.

Hopefully this will allow useful comparisons to be made and will encourage mutual understanding.

This book also aims to challenge Christians, Muslims and even those without any profession of religious faith to consider afresh the foundations on which they stand and the content of their lives. Surely we can all do better. To some extent I write as a Christian especially for Christians, to encourage renewed confidence in the faith handed down from Jesus and the Apostles and renewed commitment to live out the Christian faith positively in the contemporary world. Yet the book will hopefully serve a wider readership, for although Christians often speak of a peace which surpasses understanding, there is also an understanding which makes for peace. This is a goal for all of us to aim at.