

Starting Over :

a New Zealand perspective on new initiatives in Muslim-Christian engagement

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The 9/11 acts of unbelievable violence were a wake-up call for New Zealand, as they were for many other societies around the world. New Zealand chose not to sign up for the 'war on terror' but instead, strongly directed by Helen Clark, chose to seek pro-active patterns of peace-making such as regional inter-faith dialogue and the strengthening of centres in which engagement in common projects, academic study and dialogue could foster trust and cooperation.

In what follows I will seek to outline briefly my own response to post-9/11 developments, then describe in more detail one New Zealand project in Central Java, and finally offer some radical suggestions for a new start in Christian theological engagement with Islam. This is all somewhat experimental – not so much 'research in progress' as a journey that has hardly started. The title, 'Starting Over' relates to a comment made by a colleague when I was about to leave the School of Ministry for an Invercargill parish – 'Do you really want to have to start over again, at your age, with a whole new community of people...?' As it turned out, that was the easiest part of what followed: the elders and people of First Church supported and encouraged new initiatives in several directions.

9/11 caught me by surprise, unprepared for either the audacity or the terrible inhumanity of such acts of violence. At First Church, Invercargill our first thoughts were for America and American people. We hosted a Sunday afternoon civic service of quiet North American music, a time to meditate and think our thoughts. Our Sunday school maintained electronic contact with a PCUSA Sunday School for some considerable time, offering some solidarity to a faith community wondering if the whole world had turned against them. At the same time, however, in a Rotary context, I spelled out the prophetic elements I saw in these terrible events – while nothing at all could ever justify such acts of indiscriminate and wholesale murder, there was an element also of the kind of judgment Lincoln identified in his Second Inaugural. Whether we believe in the judgment of God, as Lincoln did, or just that what goes around comes around, a nation that so persistently engages in state-sponsored violence beyond its own borders was not going to remain immune forever.

From there on events took over. I was soon asked for talks on 'Understanding Islam' – for APWs, for U3A in both Dunedin and Invercargill, for ecumenical groups and for our own congregation. People seemed aware that a major faith tradition they had thought of – if they thought of it at all – as belonging 'somewhere else' was now very much a part of the world they/we lived in.

The people of the south also quickly realized that what they heard from the media about Islam and about terrorism was superficial and sometimes deliberately misleading. They wanted to know not ‘what we believe about Islam’ (which might have been the case previously), but what is the truth about Islam?

And it was a real challenge for me. When we first went to Indonesia in 1972 I tried to read the Qur’an, in English translation, out of a sense of responsibility, seeing I was going to be living in a country that was at that time nearly 90% Muslim. But I gave up – I had no teacher and the structure of the Qur’an made it very difficult, almost inaccessible. As my work was firstly with Christian university students and then later with Sumatran highland communities that had not embraced any world religion I was not pressed to seek any more than a general understanding of Islam. Nevertheless, I formed friendships with Muslim university students and colleagues, and came to sense something of the spiritual richness of Islam through these contacts and through sharing (as was the custom of the 1970s) in the family-based celebrations around the major Islamic festivals. I came to the same conclusion about Muslims as I had earlier about Jewish people – we serve God who is one. God has called each of us into our own paths of discipleship and while people might sometimes choose to convert from one faith tradition to another we should not seek such conversion of Jewish or Muslim people as a mission strategy. So in 2001 I had to begin learning quickly, presenting my public talks as ‘reflections from a Christian perspective’. At this point there occurred another unanticipated intervention.

Professor Karel Steenbrink, Catholic, professor of Intercultural Theology in the University of Utrecht, and one of the instigators of the History of Christianity in Indonesia Project, began sending me some of his writing on Islam – fruit of a lifelong engagement that began with doctoral study of traditional Islamic education in Indonesia (during which he lived as an active member of Muslim boarding school communities) and later teaching in Islamic tertiary institutions in Java. Later he and his colleagues asked me to assist Indonesian students, Christian and Muslim, presenting theses in English in two Dutch universities. I have placed a copy of one of these in the Hewitson Library: a study by the Protestant New Testament scholar Bambang Subandrijo of the Jesus hymns in Colossians and the sura Maryam (Qur’an 19), and the figures of Icon (*Eikon*) and Sign (*Ayat*) employed in them as functional titles of Jesus – titles that speak of his role in making the work of God actual in the world.¹

This showed me ways of bringing together the systems of exegesis employed by Muslim and Christian scholars within what Steenbrink called ‘a community of exegesis’ – an inter-faith endeavour to read Jewish, Christian and Muslim scripture, each in its own context but aware of common themes, shared stories and familiar figures; and aware also of the ways in which we often highjack other scripture to serve our own agendas. In 2006 I translated his *De Jezusverzen in de Koran* published that year, a book that moves the study of ‘Jesus in the Qur’an’ into a new format which calls not just for sympathetic interest but for a theological response.

¹ Bambang Subandrijo, *Eikōn and Āyat: Points of Encounter between Indonesian Christian and Muslim Perspectives on Jesus*, Academisch Proefschrift, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2007.

All this had happened before I was invited to take up an appointment as a visiting professor in the Centre for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies (CRCS)² in the Graduate School of Gadjah Mada University (UGM), Yogyakarta, Indonesia – sponsored by the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade/NZAid, with the funding channeled through Victoria University of Wellington as part of that university's MoU with UGM. This appointment had been set up under the then Prime Minister's programme for Interfaith Dialogue, and had been prepared on the ground by New Zealand diplomats and the International Office of VUW – all of whom were working in new territory so far as sponsoring a university teacher, let alone a religious studies teacher, as part of the New Zealand aid programme. I spent a short, intense, period at CRCS in 2007 and a five-month period in 2008. In between I taught an undergraduate course on inter-faith exegesis at Otago, which evoked a positive student response in spite of its unfamiliar scope and methodology.

Gadjah Mada University was founded in 1945 when the then Sultan of Yogyakarta gave rural land for the establishment of a national university that would safeguard the principles of inclusive nationalism in the face of growing Muslim, Christian and other claims for tertiary institutions that would reflect the status of their faith-communities in a nation that was still struggling to establish its independence. While the word 'secular' is avoided in Indonesia, where it is taken to signify an anti-religious stance, the aim for UGM was to provide a modern tertiary education open to all in an environment where teachers' and students' religious affiliations would be respected but not allowed to influence the way in which they taught or were taught. While the struggle to secure the Independence proclaimed in 1945 continued (until the end of 1949) the new university occupied pavilions in the kraton – the sultan's fortified palace complex in the heart of Yogyakarta city.

The original grant of land was said to have been the equivalent of a Javanese village with its associated lands and even in the early 1970s a visit to the Gadjah Mada campus was a ride in the country. Today the campus is surrounded by the expanding city but is marked off with its own administration, a city within the city, described in 2007 on the UGM website as an 'educopolis'. With a student roll of 53,000, UGM has faculties where we have departments (I walked past the Faculty of Geography most days), and extensive graduate and postgraduate programmes that draw students from all over Indonesia and from overseas (I dealt with students from Poland, Croatia, USA, Egypt, Philippines and Korea). Within easy distance of UGM are internationally-recognised Islamic, Catholic and Protestant universities, a government university that began life as a teachers' college, and a number of very modern tertiary institutions sponsored by foundations such as Muhammadiyah.³ These institutions not only further increase the city's student

² <http://www.crcs.ugm.ac.id>

³ One of two Indonesian Muslim mass organizations, Muhammadiyah, founded in 1912, is associated with modernism and the purification of Islam from innovation and superstition. I was invited to give lectures/seminars in the Muhammadiyah Universities in Yogyakarta and Surakarta (Solo).

population but greatly enrich the pool of teachers and specialists who frequently undertake work beyond their own institutions.

True to its secular-nationalist foundation, Gadjah Mada University has never had a theology department or undergraduate religious studies programmes. Unlike the religious tertiary foundations, UGM reports to the Ministry of Education and is free of the oversight of the Ministry of Religion. The establishment of CRCS in 2000, within the Graduate School, was a new development for UGM, and grew directly from the realization that the terrible conflicts in Indonesia in the period (1998-) following the overthrow of the military-backed regime of President Suharto often drew on religious identities to categorize enemies or to whip up emotions. CRCS is a pro-active endeavour to provide an environment in which graduate students from different backgrounds can study for an internationally recognized qualification (MA), work together both on campus and in off-campus projects, and learn in the process to appreciate each other, to value viewpoints other than their own, and to find the benefit to be realized when a range of viewpoints is brought together.

After starting as a 'Centre for Comparative Religious Studies' CRCS took its present name, to allay some anxieties about relativistic reductionism, and decided to focus on religions in their social and cultural contexts rather than the abstract or theoretical comparison of the major religions found in Indonesia – so my interest in inter-scriptural exegesis had to go on the back-burner.

New Zealand identified CRCS as an institution with a clearly identified, and already productive, programme to which a modest New Zealand contribution might be of strategic value. Dr Jim Veitch of VUW has lectured at the Centre and a CRCS staff member began a PhD programme at VUW in 2008. My assignment in 2007 was to contribute to curriculum development and to report on potential areas for the development of the Centre's library, and to make whatever other contribution might be appropriate. This also gave me a good opportunity to begin preparation, and to assess the resources available, for my 2008 teaching.

In 2008 I had full responsibility for an MA course on 'Religion, State and Civil Society', as well as contributing to the general programme of the Centre, and also to some of the activities of the newly established inter-university PhD programme sponsored by the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS)⁴ which moved into a suite opposite CRCS in the UGM Graduate School in 2007. This programme, sponsored jointly by Gadjah Mada, the State Islamic University 'Sunan Kalijaga' (which has a long pattern of open, cooperative study of religions) and Satya Wacana Christian University (where Ian Cairns taught for some years), leads to the UGM PhD. ICRS is a new project, with no graduates at this stage, but is a good dialogue partner for CRCS, giving us access to both staff and library resources, and the different perspectives, of the two religious foundations.

⁴ <http://www.icrs.ugm.ac.id>

Entry to the CRCS programme is strongly competitive, with about 24 new students accepted each year (in 2008 from a final short list of about 40 'possibles'). Criteria for entry are balanced between academic qualification (the equivalent of a NZ honours degree or a first professional degree) and social potential (the university is looking for students who are potential 'opinion formers' - teachers, academics, journalists, activists – several of the students I taught were already published writers, the best of them a regular writer of incisive journalism supporting open attitudes and offering a critique of religious violence and what he sees as attitudes and behaviour that constricts and limits the full richness of Islam.

Following up my interest in curriculum development (which was part of my brief) I redesigned the 'Religion, State and Civil Society' paper away from the 'American' emphasis which is strong in CRCS and all-pervasive in ICRS. Instead of taking regular tests, setting formal assignments and a final examination (more appropriate in an undergraduate programme) I gained approval to assess the course on the basis of an initial essay (written before the course was more than a couple of weeks old), weekly reading reports on material students found or chose, for themselves and a final long essay on 'The role, if any, of the state in the management of religion in a participatory democracy'. Also, following the example of the late Professor Jack Dodd (my Physics teacher in 1960) I banned any writing while I was talking – and provided written course notes instead, along with extensive suggestions from which the students could choose reading in areas of particular interest. Student intervention was encouraged and most classes were interactive – most rewardingly so when students were encouraged to share perspectives unique to their own regions.

The CRCS programme is very full, with class sessions for various courses five days a week, so there were some delays in submission of material, and some assignments and long essays followed me home. The experiment however was successful; most students completed the course on time or within the grace period allowed between semesters, the quality of many of the weekly reports was high – and influenced my re-shaping of the course as it advanced. One student has had his long essay accepted as a paper for a national conference.

Other involvement while at CRCS included interaction with staff colleagues and students in the CRCS and the ICRS programmes, guidance and examination of the MA theses produced at the end of the CRCS course, participation in the weekly forum when staff or visitors present a paper for colleagues and students of the Graduate School. We were invited to join community gatherings to mark various stages of the fasting month, and I was invited to lecture at the Muhammadiyah Universities in Yogyakarta and Surakarta (Solo), the Christian University in Ambon, and to a gathering of diplomats, journalists and activists in Jakarta (sponsored by one of the many NGOs that have sprung up to promote programmes for social and political development, inter-faith co-operation and community development in the wake of the *Reformasi* era that followed the fall of the Suharto regime.

There are several indicators of the quality of the work being done. In 2008 an earlier CRCS student, now enrolled for the UGM PhD, had her MA thesis published in Indonesian by a leading publisher⁵. In a lecture to the Graduate School in 2008 Professor Merle Ricklefs, an international authority on the Islamisation of Java, drew attention more than once to the fact that CRCS MA theses embodied data and observations available nowhere else, being based as they were on supervised research in concrete local situations.⁶ I was asked in 2008 to read and assess a number of earlier theses for possible publication.

New Zealand identified CRCS as a strategic programme partner because it is the only academic religion programme in Indonesia that answers to a ‘secular’ university and to the Ministry of Education; because it now has an internationally recognized curriculum supported by a variety of overseas teachers and institutions; because it provides opportunities for sustained inter-faith cooperation in a staff and student body that represents Muslim, Christian, Hindu and Buddhist faith traditions; because it is an integral part of one of Asia’s leading universities and because it practices as well as teaches openness, respect, gender equality and the value of diversity.

Personally, the experience of living and working in a predominantly Muslim community in the unique context of Yogyakarta (where we began our language study in 1972) has been incredibly enriching. While there is some evidence that Islamic radicals are now moving in on a situation which they must find very challenging, Yogyakarta is still a haven of civility and harmony – a good example of ‘civil Islam’ at work. Here, under the continuing enlightened rule of its revered sultan (who is regularly elected governor of the special region created when, in 1945, his father united the sultanate to the emerging independent Republic) Yogya thrives on a pragmatic combination of Javanese and nationalist traditions. The ethos of the city is shaped by an amalgam of *Kejawèn* – the traditional Javanese world-view –, an open Islam that is not only tolerant but even appreciative of other religious traditions, a firm nationalism, a toleration of variety in lifestyles⁷ and a recognition that all can best get on with the struggle for life and livelihood where people are able to be independent and free to order their own lives. Yogyakarta, and the present sultan, played key roles in initiating the movement that led to the resignation of President Suharto and the renewal of a democratic political order. When I asked people what holds all this unique diversity together in Yogyakarta the answer was unhesitating, and unequivocal – the sultan.

⁵ Mega Hidayati, *Jurang di antara kita: Tentang keterbatasan manusia dan problema dialog dalam masyarakat multikultur* [‘The gulf between us: concerning human limitation and the problem of dialogue in a multicultural society’], Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2008 (179p.).

⁶ M. C. Ricklefs, ‘Islamisation in Indonesian and its opponents’, Studium Generale lecture, UGM, 15 Sept. 2008

⁷ A university colleague from another region who has never married said, ‘This is the only place in the country where no one has ever asked me, “Why are you not married?”’; she was aware of how unusual this was in a culture where the most personal questions are asked without hesitation.

While Yogyakarta is clearly a special case, unable to be replicated elsewhere,⁸ its formula is not far removed from that of the old Islamic port cities where rulers maintained a society in which law was drawn from a variety of sources and principles were maintained in a flexible way that enabled outsiders to reside and work, and facilitated the main activity of the city – trade with both the inland regions and foreign merchants. This form of civil Islam is being identified both as a sign that Islam (contrary to much western opinion) can support participatory democracy, and as a way of creating prosperous and harmonious communities in which people can pursue their trade and their religion without threat or disruption from others.

Two other very significant CRCS programmes with which I was not directly involved are the community projects and the talk-back radio programme, *Resonansi*. Both were designed to take the issues and perspectives of CRCS out beyond the academic community. Three recent community projects were: 1) dealing on the ground with religious division in a village in East Java, 2) surveying the barriers to registering inter-faith marriages (and the steps people take to get around the barriers) and 3) the problem of providing very young children with religious education that promotes a positive appreciation of their faith tradition without passing on the teachers' religious prejudices. Three short films have been produced to share the learnings of these three completed projects: *Beragama dalam Keragaman*, now available together on DVD.⁹

Resonance is a multi-media extension programme, using radio, television and journalism. Its aim is to promote inter-religious dialogue and to provide 'space' in which social and religious issues can be discussed. People from all over Indonesia (which is as wide as the continent of Europe – and embodies as much social, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity) participated in phone-back sessions, many of which have been published in transcript.¹⁰ In the last couple of years CRCS and ICRS have sponsored international seminars on Globalisation and on Response to Natural Disaster.

Now finally and briefly I want to end, as I began, on a personal note. What happens to some one exposed to such an environment? For centuries Christians, with some outstanding exceptions, have privileged their own revelation, their own scripture and their own tradition of faith in respect to both Judaism and Islam. The ultimate result in one case is the radical 'takeover' of Jewish scripture by

⁸ Not even in the 'twin' sultanate of Surakarta (Solo), where radically conservative Islam is much more evident and assertive, and the sultan little more than a revered symbol of the past.

⁹ *Religiosity in Diversity: Beragama dalam Keragaman – Tiga Film Dokumentar*, Yogyakarta, CRCS, Sekolah Pascasarjana, Universitas Gadjah Mada 2007 (Indonesian with English subtitles).

¹⁰ One example, Suhadi Cholil, ed., *Resonansi Dialog Agama dan Budaya: Dari Kebebasan Beragama, Pendidikan Multikultural Sampai RUU Anti Pornografi*, Yogyakarta, CRCS, 2008; I found this careful transcript a valuable guide, too, to modern spoken Indonesian which has changed considerably since we left in 1978. Title translates: 'Resonance the Dialogue between Religion and Culture: from Religious Freedom, Multicultural Education to the Draft Anti-pornography Statue [which proposed banning almost everything from swim suits to breast-feeding outside the house].

Christian exegetes and in the other is the 'Clash of Civilisations' scenario¹¹ which was given a re-run after 9/11. The New Zealand government, and our diplomats overseas, gave strong support to a counter-movement, the 'Alliance of Civilizations', established in 2005, initially sponsored by Turkey and Spain.¹² This urges a cooperative and not a confrontational approach to political, religious and cultural differences.

For me, the combination of learning to appreciate Islamic scripture as something within and not apart from the Hebrew and Christian traditions; the challenge to re-examine the attitudes and judgments (and mutual ignorance) that promote antagonism, tension and conflict; and the experience of working within inclusive communities to confront urgent issues in our modern world have led me to the conclusion that we need to 'start over' – to begin again in a new context to find what we share, rather than continuing to underline what divides these traditions from each other. After centuries of conflict no one should expect a sudden, dramatic turn-around in relationships, but my own experience is that even in small contexts significant changes can be made, and new understandings can be arrived at.

These personal reflections might be sub-titled, 'Confessions of a theological minimalist'. If we hold to essentials and 'bracket' much of the detail of our doctrine (a procedure advocated by Thomas Aquinas in his *principium*)¹³ we can find common ground without denying our own faith or requiring Jewish or Muslim dialogue partners to deny theirs. There is time left now for little more than a shopping list of areas for investigation and review.

For me the way to go seems to embrace some of these issues:

*Islamic scripture clearly belongs to the same 'family' of revelation as the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. 'Of a truth, this and what Jesus brought have come from the same niche', the Christian king (Negus) of Abyssinia was reported to have said after hearing early Muslim refugees, led by the Prophet's nephew, explain their faith and read from the chapter *Maryam* (Qur'an 19).

*We share belief that God is one. Allah (Arabic: 'The God') is not the name of 'another god' – as many Christians thoughtlessly assume - but the Arabic name of the One God; a name of special reverence and holiness to all Muslims but used also by Arabic speaking Christians in the Middle East, and by Christians in places like Malta and Indonesia whose languages have been enriched by Arabic.

We could do well to re-acknowledge the mystery of God – the 'Undefined Presence' to borrow a very recent expression from Albert Moore's unpublished Autobiography. We need to eliminate insofar as we can all anthropomorphisms –even the 'celestial Mind' (who built the laws of mathematics into the order of creation) favoured by some contemporary scientific apologists.

¹¹ The classic text was Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York 2003 [orig. 1996] which tried to reconfigure international relations as a looming West [which he saw as a Christian civilization] vs. Islam clash.

¹² *Alliance of Civilizations: Report of the High-level Group 13 November 2006*, New York, United Nations, 2006. <http://www.unAOC.org>

¹³ Discussed by Edward Schillebeeckx, 'Thomas Aquinas: Passion for truth as loving service to men and women' in his *For the Sake of the Gospel*, ET: SCM: London, 1989, pp 125-9.

On the other hand much Muslim witness about God should find a warm response among those nurtured in a Calvinist tradition: God is sovereign, creator, and judge in the last days; God calls whoever he will; God is so constantly affirmed as merciful and compassionate that these two attributes are employed as proper names of God in the Qur'an: The Merciful, The Compassionate. Salvation depends wholly on the sovereign election of God and is reflected in human response (*Islam* = peace [s-l-m] through surrender to God); a response which, at least in the Sufi tradition, is seen itself as a sign and gift of God's love for the individual.

*Jesus has a unique place in Islam – in both scripture¹⁴ and the oral tradition¹⁵ known as the *Tales of the Prophets*, but it is significantly different from the western Christology of the divine Son of God. It has been suggested that the teaching of the Qur'an about Jesus is a conscious corrective to the perceived excesses of the imperial theology of Byzantium.¹⁶ Contemporary interest in the historical figure of Jesus and a growing awareness of the centuries of faithful witness of the Church of the East (east of Antioch) that never accepted the Christology of Nicea and Chalcedon has set the scene for a more positive response to this corrective. It may also re-open possibilities for communication with modern westerners alienated from what they see as over-elaborated traditional doctrines.

* It is well known that Islam rejects the Trinitarian understanding of God, which it understands as a tritheism of 'God-Jesus-Mary' – associating the Greek *Theotokos* – Mother-of-God with the general doctrine of the Trinity.

Qur'an 4: 171 People of the book!

Do not go too far in your religion
Or say of God anything but the truth.
The Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, is God's messenger
and His word that He directed to Mary
and a spirit from Him.
Believe then in God and do not say: three.
Desist from that. It is better for you.
God is one God, praise Him!
That he should have a child!

Taking this caution seriously does not involve rejection of the Trinitarian tradition in which many of us have been nurtured but suggests we might exercise extreme caution not to go beyond what is justified by the biblical revelation. Given the extravagant excesses of popular religiosity and the confusion that arises even in scholarly circles from the use of categories and terms that have changed their meaning radically over the centuries, we might take a lead from Edward Schillebeeckx – who three times survived the

¹⁴ Karel Steenbrink, *De Jezusverzen in de Koran* (Zoetemeer: Meinema, 2006).

¹⁵ Tarif Khalidi, comp. and trans., *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*, Cambridge Mass/Lond: Harvard Univ. Press, 2001

¹⁶ The Utrecht inaugural lecture of Karel Steenbrink, *Een Correctief Evangelie: Koran 19: 16-40 over Jezus, zoon van Maria*, (Utrecht: Faculteit Godgeleerdheid, Universiteit Utrecht, 2005).

investigation of his orthodoxy by the Holy Office. In the context of a discussion of contemporary (1993) theological speculation about the Trinity he affirms that Trinity is God's way of being personal but rejects discussion about 'three persons' which leads to tritheism:

'God is Trinity (that is dogma!), but God is not three persons. That would be tritheism. I have never written on this subject because I am afraid of it. I don't want to speculate... So I am very modest, almost agnostic, about a Trinitarian theology.'¹⁷

*It is often claimed by Christians that Islam endorses a doctrine of 'salvation by works'. The role of Jesus as 'saviour' is not denied in Islam so much as ignored. The call to submit to God and find peace (*Islam* embodies the three Arabic consonants, s-l-m, that make up the root of both *salaam* and *shalom*) resonates with both Jesus' call to seek the reign of God (not a place but a state, like 'Islam', where people live in obedience to God, and find peace-salvation) and with the biblical verbs we translate as 'turn away from' (repent), 'turn back' (return), 'turn around' (convert). Salvation here, from first to last, depends of the sovereign election of God who is merciful and compassionate; that this is a doctrine of grace, not of works.

Within Christianity itself there are many 'redemptive analogies' – contextually focused attempts to illustrate and explain the redemptive act of God. Islam offers not a different faith but a different analogy, one that points to another path, or pattern of election, response and obedience.

There are many other issues that need to be raised and discussed, but I want to end on a positive point, that I have not seen discussed elsewhere – the role of Spirit.

It will have been noted that the Holy Spirit was not included in what Islam understood the Christian Trinity to be. Here we see clearly the radical difference between a Semitic understanding of Spirit of God (*Ruah-Yahweh*, *Roh min-Hu* [Spirit from Him] and the personalized Spirit with the definite article (The Holy Spirit) of orthodox Christian tradition. In scripture 'Spirit of God', often without an article, represents the activity in the material world of God 'who has neither body, form nor parts'. In Islamic witness both Jesus and the angel Gabriel are spoken of as Spirit from Him – a manifestation of God active in the world. This is (as far as I am aware) an unexplored area of doctrinal investigation. It should make Christological affirmations like, 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' (2 Corinthians 5:19) accessible to Muslim understanding, within the contexts of both Muslim and Christian tradition. This is an area that could be explored... .

¹⁷ Edward Schillebeeckx, *I am a Happy Theologian: Conversations with Francesco Strazzari*, ET John Bowden, London: SCM Press, 1994, pp 50-3 at p 52. Compare his comment in *Jezus: Het verhaal van een levende*, Bloemendaal: Nelissen, 1974, p538: 'The gospels do not speak of "persons" in God; any more than the first great Christological councils do.'

