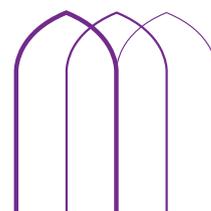


LEARNING TOGETHER IN A COMPLEX WORLD



THE CENTRE FOR
**MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN
STUDIES**

O X F O R D



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Published in 2016

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please contact:

Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies
109A Iffley Rd.
Oxford
OX4 1EH

Or

Email: office@cmcsoxford.org.uk

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CMCS: A LEARNING COMMUNITY IN A COMPLEX WORLD

As Richard McCallum's review of *One Islam, Many Muslim Worlds* (Baker, 2015) at the end of this *Research Briefing* reminds us, the world of Islam is complex. The worlds of Christianity, politics, the West, the Middle East and of everywhere else where Christians and Muslims relate to each other are also amazingly complex. The great challenge is to find ways of making sense of it all. So our learning community at CMCS looks for simple questions that can organise our ideas without blinding us to the complexity.

Every year, we award scholarships to help a Muslim and a Christian doctoral student in their research; and we look for students who are asking questions that have the potential of transforming Christian-Muslim relations in particular areas. The two students become part of our learning community, and convene our monthly *Qur'an & Bible* study group. The idea is that the experience of being a part of the community should be at least as helpful to their research as is the money that they receive from us.

QUR'AN AND BIBLE GROUP

In *Research Briefing No.6* two of our former scholarship holders report on their work, and Shabbir Akhtar, who has been part of our community since 2012, reflects on the *Qur'an & Bible* group.

Pat Brittenden opens up the complex consequences of the growth of new Christian communities in Muslim majority countries. Where discussion has often centred on the legitimacy of conversion, his research looks at how those communities form their identities and, in particular, how they educate themselves theologically. His organising question is educational, and is simplified by focussing on Algeria as a case study.

Lena Wettach approaches the complex situation of Christians in the Holy Land through an apparently simple question of biblical interpretation: 'Is the state of Israel a fulfilment of OT prophecy?' – a perennial issue in both Muslim-Christian and intra-Christian conversations. Her research tries to understand the range of people grappling with the question, looking both at how they understand the world and at the wider questions of how history and culture shape their interpretation of scripture.

PARALLEL ISSUES

From Shabbir Akhtar, we hear about some of the issues that make reading the Bible a challenge for Muslims. These parallel the issues for Christian readers of the Qur'an, and reading the two scriptures together adds another layer of complexity. The *Qur'an & Bible* group offers a double way into the complexity of Christian-Muslim interactions. First, it is a way of relationship: Muslims and Christians meet one another, share a meal and talk together. Second, it is a way of scripture study: it enables people to explore the roots of each other's faith.

My observation is that this double encounter not only opens doors of relationship and understanding, but also motivates and lays foundations for a whole range of academic study. It is a privilege to see how our scholarship holders develop their research and go on to contribute to our complex world.



Dr Ida Glaser, Director, Centre Muslim-Christian Studies

CHRISTIAN TEACHING IN THE CONTEXT OF ISLAM IN ALGERIA

In the last decade we have witnessed numerous publications and increased discussion (both in the academy and at a community level) about the growth and influence of Islam in the West and the contribution of Muslims to our increasingly pluralistic and multi-cultural society in the UK. However much less is known about the rapid growth of predominantly Muslim-background churches in majority-Muslim contexts across the world.

My research focuses on the development of the Algerian church. In the field of practical theology and through the hermeneutical lens of 'appropriate pedagogy' (or teaching) I am exploring the identity and purpose of the Algerian Church especially in its relation to the Algerian national identity. Teaching and learning in the Algerian Church is a window into the nature and purpose of a marginal community that is contributing to the field of Muslim-Christian relations.

In the majority-Muslim context of Algeria culture is viewed as a bounded entity, with "subordinate cultures functioning in their own

private space and dependent on the values of the dominant culture for their continued existence."¹ Muslim-Christian relations in Algeria also inhabit a paradigm, which from the Muslim perspective assumes that Christianity is foreign at best, or colonial at worst. The presence and growth of the Algerian church is therefore challenging the idea that Algeria is irreducibly Muslim and that Christianity is primarily Western. However, it is also shedding light on Christian understandings of Islam and both the ambiguity and the potential of the Church's conscious engagement with Islam as a theological and missiological priority.



Algerian church

Just over half the interviewees in my field study indicated that engaging with Islam or specifically referring to Qur'anic or other Muslim concepts was not a priority in Christian education and theological training. The logic presented was that all BMBs² were familiar with Islam, having grown up as Muslims, and the pressing need for the church was Christian discipleship and biblical education. Lurking behind this, I detected the theory-to-practice 'leap' in which the students' ability to apply Christian teaching to the Muslim context was assumed to be automatic. Some suggested that when Algerians taught biblical concepts they always implicitly related them to the Muslim world-view or background. In addition to this, several talked about the dangers of syncretistic thinking and therefore suggested that the emphasis of teaching should be on drawing believers out from Islam and getting rid of 'old baggage' from their Muslim background.

However, a smaller number of interviewees talked about the need to situate all Christian teaching in the mould of their Muslim culture. They suggested that if biblical training did not engage with the Islamic critique of Christian doctrine then it risked resulting in little more than a Christian counter indoctrination of believers. In this case the dictate of the Qur'an is replaced by the dictate of the Bible and the authority of the 'expert' Sheikh or Imam is replaced by the 'specially anointed pastor'.

FAITHFULNESS AND AUTHENTICITY

This tension in the debate about levels of continuity or discontinuity of BMB communities with Islam and Muslim culture is observable in the contemporary 'insider movement' debate.³ Overwhelmingly the Algerian church has rejected the concept of an 'insider approach' in their context. Indeed in Algeria the church's public witness, however costly, is regarded as a mark of faithfulness and Christian authenticity. Radical contextualization that avoids the public confession of Christian identity and the proclamation of the Gospel are perceived to be at best naïve or at worst dishonest and a fearful denial of the cross.

However, several believers interviewed did talk about the need to create new margins in Christian-Muslim relations. This resembled what the late Lesslie Newbigin described as a new kind of line... "a line dividing the church and the world but not separating the Christian community from the local culture".⁴ Discerning the BMB church's response to the 'world' - that which is in direct opposition to the Christian Gospel - as distinct from its relationship with local Muslim 'culture' appears to be the challenge for the church. Teaching and learning will need consciously to equip BMBs to be both present and engaged in this margin.

This might mean something similar to the 'hospitality' and 'embassy' approach in Kenneth Cragg's theology of mission to Muslims. That is, being committed to listening to "the call of the minaret" and appreciating Islam at its very best (hospitality), yet judging everything in Islam by the measure of Christ (embassy).⁵

HOSPITALITY AND EMBASSY

Achieving this balance between hospitality and embassy requires a kind of multidimensional model of training: formative training that emphasises the power of testimony, love, prayer and consecrated lives; and critical theological education that facilitates biblical thinking about Islam; as well as reading the Bible and Christian theology in the context of Islam. In the words of Turner and Bediako such a vision of theological education takes for granted "the character of theology as an intellectual activity on the frontier with the non-Christian world, and hence as essentially communicative, evangelistic and missionary."⁶

This model of training on the margin of Christian-Muslim relations is relatively recent and has received very little attention either in academic research or in the popular press. The growth of substantial numbers of BMB churches in the majority-Muslim world is nonetheless contributing to Christian-Muslim relations at a social, theological and missiological level. In the context of ever-increasing post-Western Christianity the BMB stream of the world church may have an important contribution to play both in how Christians relate to Muslims and how the scriptures and Christian tradition are interpreted in the light of Islam.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Jackson, R., *International Perspectives on Citizenship* (London: Routledge, 2003) p.11
- 2 Believer from a Muslim Background
- 3 This is a movement in which "a growing number of families, individuals, clans, and/or friendship-webs are becoming faithful disciples of Jesus within the culture of their people group, including their religious culture" (Higgins, K., 'The Key To Insider Movements: The "Devoteds" of Acts', *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 21, 2004, p.155).
- 4 Newbigin, L., *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM, 1953), p.12
- 5 Cragg, K., *The Call of the Minaret* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000 - first published 1956)
- 6 Quoted in Ott, C. & Netland, H., (eds) *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 2006)



Patrick Brittenden is a DPhil candidate at Regent's Park College, University of Oxford

SPACES OF ENCOUNTER AS RESEARCH TOOL

My doctoral work, which is now nearing completion, is an ethnography of a particularly contentious theological question: “Is the State of Israel a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy?” Answers to this question have created a number of different theologies from dispensationalism, through Christian Zionism and messianic Judaism, to contextual Palestinian theology. All of these have inspired different kinds of political, social, and missional activism.

What was initially designed to be a study of these defensive activisms developed into a nine month ethnographic study of ‘encounters’ between North American/European and Palestinian evangelical Christians in Israel-Palestine. These everyday encounters between Western tourists, missionaries, and volunteers on the one hand and members of the Palestinian evangelical community on the other reveal the historical and cultural complexity with which the respective theologies – incoherent to the untutored eye – are endowed.

FAITH COMMITMENTS

While the approach to the study of ‘spaces of encounter’ is not new, it brought a number of innovations to the study of Israel-Palestine and the Anthropology of Christianity. ¹ Firstly, it allowed me as a researcher to take seriously the faith commitments of my respondents. While previously in the study of religious identities in Palestine religion has been taken mostly as a social and cultural marker rather than an entity in its own right, my project has rendered visible the different theologies and related social and political commitments of their adherents.²

I have taken inspiration from the new consideration of ethics in anthropological research, and in particular from James Laidlaw’s admonition to approach our research with humility, which involves taking seriously the forms of life we describe: regarding them – and therefore describing them – as something we learn from as well as about; and it involves learning to think with as well as about their concepts, such that those concepts become resources in our own critical reflection and self-constitution. ³ Thus, while not disregarding the political and social dimensions of the Israel-Palestine context, I have taken seriously the spiritual dimensions ascribed to it by my various respondents, which for some meant a heavy investment in the building up of the Israeli state and for others the challenging of Christian Zionist theology in North America and Europe.

While taking seriously my respondents’ faith commitments and considering their theology, the lens of encounter has also revealed the

“social life of Scripture”, i.e. the extent to which the interpretation of scripture is influenced by cultural and social values. ⁴ Again, the different interpretations are expressed in prayer for, financial, moral, and political support of, and visits to Israel, many times with little connection between the ‘Israel of the evangelical imagination’ and the political and social situation of the state itself. This ‘scripturalising’ allows Western evangelicals to feel attached by a spiritual ‘birth-right’ to a territory far from the place they call their home. ⁵ In this context, evangelical Palestinian Christians pose an anomaly which is most often ignored, at times tolerated, and in the worst case negated and fought against. Indigenous evangelicals are often not seen as citizens of the State of Israel, but merely as fellow citizens of the ‘heavenly Kingdom’, or residents in a seemingly apolitical ‘land of Israel’.

IMPERIAL THEOLOGIES

Frequently, the beliefs and attitudes of Western evangelical Christians lead to financial and moral dependency among Palestinian evangelical churches. However, a small number of Palestinian evangelicals are seeking to challenge what they consider ‘imperial theologies’. For this purpose, the faculty at Bethlehem Bible College hold a biennial conference called ‘Christ at the Checkpoint’ for an international audience in order to reflect on how to deal ‘Christianly’ with the Israeli occupation and its checkpoint regime. In the midst of phenomenal national and international opposition they have sought to formulate a Palestinian theology that relies on the same evangelical values (such as supremacy of biblical scripture, a personal relationship with Jesus, the importance of the death and resurrection of Christ, etc.) as their Western counterparts, with, however, a drastically different outcome. ⁶ Their project closely resembles the social justice, present-oriented theologies found within movements such as ‘Black Lives Matter’ and anti-apartheid activism in South Africa.

Both of these aspects – taking seriously the projects of one’s conversation partners, and recognising the cultural and historical ideas that have shaped scriptural interpretation – have been influenced by my



Church and mosque in Jerusalem

exposure to the intellectual endeavour of CMCS. While my research considers intra-faith encounters within just one Christian tradition, the work of CMCS has taught me to engage humbly across difference. In particular the Qu'ran and Bible discussion groups, which I had the honour of co-facilitating, revealed the complexity of differing scriptural interpretations within the same traditions (e.g. different conceptions of 'angels' between Orthodox and Baptist participants), as well as between Muslim and Christian faith traditions.

- 4 Bielo, J. S., *The social life of Scriptures: cross-cultural perspectives on biblicalism*. (New Brunswick, NJ.: Rutgers University Press, 2009)
- 5 Wimbush, V. L., *Scripturalizing the human: the written as the political*, (London: Routledge, 2015)
- 6 See for example Isaac, M., *From land to lands, from Eden to the renewed earth: a Christ-centred biblical theology of the Promised Land*. (Carlisle: Langham Monographs, 2015)

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Faier, L., & Rofel, L., 'Ethnographies of Encounter', *Annu. Rev. Anthropol.* 43, 363–77, 2014
- 2 See for instance: Bowman, G., "'In Dubious Battle on the Plains of Heav'n': The Politics of Possession in Jerusalem's Holy Sepulchre", *History and Anthropology*, 22(3), 371–399, 2011; Kaartveit, B. H., 'The Christians of Palestine: Strength, Vulnerability, and Self-restraint within a Multi-sectarian Community', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 49(5), 732–749, 2013; Lybarger, L. D. *Identity and religion in Palestine: the struggle between Islamism and secularism in the occupied territories*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007)
- 3 Laidlaw, J. *The subject of virtue: an anthropology of ethics and freedom*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.45



Lena Rose (née Wettach) is currently a D.Phil Candidate in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS), University of Oxford.

QUR'AN & BIBLE: A MUSLIM VIEW

In this article Dr Shabbir Akhtar talks to Research Briefings about his experience of reading the Bible and being part of the *Qur'an and Bible* group at CMCS.

RB Do you remember the first time you read the Bible?

SA It was when I was at Middle School in Bradford aged ten. I had just moved to England from a village in Pakistan where I wouldn't even have known what Christians were. But some of the (Bible) stories, like the story of Joseph, were familiar to me from my own religious tradition, and then, of course, the whole thing about Christmas led me to want to read the Bible on my own.

But serious reading of the Bible occurred when I was a professor in the International Islamic University in Malaysia, when I was in my mid-thirties. I wanted to show my Muslim students copies of the

Bible in the original languages, and for them that was a traumatic experience. They had never seen a copy of the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament in Greek before.

RB Many Muslims are indifferent to the Bible and others read it for polemical purposes. Why do you think it's important as a Muslim to read the Bible and take it seriously?

SA Well I think that you can't really understand Islam itself without having a clear sense of its two major religious precedents. So this is a self-serving reason. (Also) I felt that a lot of Christians and a small number of Jews had taken the trouble to pay tribute to Islam.



The Qur'an and Bible group at CMCS

Without accepting it they had taken the trouble to understand it sympathetically and I felt that there has been no Muslim attempt to look at the Bible in all seriousness, neither historically nor contemporaneously. That's a shame.

I suppose the other reason is that Christianity has the longest continuous apologetic tradition of answering other faiths and answering secular humanism starting with great philosophers of religion like Anselm and Aquinas. So this has inspired me to want to understand this religion which has such a remarkable continuous and rich philosophical tradition to accompany its theology. I think Islam has a truncated philosophical tradition, meaning there was one but then it was aborted. Others would say it was an illegitimate Greek idea anyway. The fact is that in Sunni Islam there is no continuous accompanying philosophical tradition which would feed into a responsible mature kind of apologetics. I think Christianity has it. Most of the people answering sophisticated secular humanist critiques of monotheism are usually Christian philosophers of religion like Richard Swinburne and Roger Trigg.

RB So what happens at a CMCS *Qur'an & Bible* session?

SA Well apart from the fact that we have a wonderfully hospitable atmosphere where people eat and sit and talk to each other and relax as friends, we look at the texts and we try to see what thematic and theological similarities there are, and what differences there are too. And these usually emerge in the context of amiable dispute between the various participants. There is the novel experience for the Muslims of hearing what a Christian thinks about the *Qur'an*. And among the Christians there is also a good range of theological opinion; sometimes in fact it's surprising I think to the Muslim participants, how much of a difference there is amongst the Christians about certain texts. You know the Bible is a more difficult text because of the variety of different types of writing in it. The *Qur'an* is difficult too in its own way for linguistic reasons.

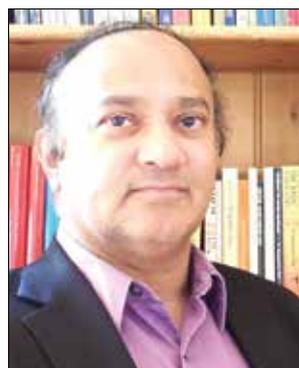
The classical Arabic may puzzle people, but its genre is just one really, a sort of poetic prose, whereas in the Bible there are different types of writing. So if you are completely new to that and you've not had any background and you're just face to face with the text, you're not really sure how to interpret it. So I think for the Muslim they are not as equipped perhaps to understand these types of genres. Whereas for the Christians there is only one simple format, so it's fairly clear as to what's being said. They may not agree with it but at least they understand very clearly what's being said.

RB Given the differing views of the inspiration of the texts and probably the ultimately irreconcilable nature of the two scriptures, what's the value of Christians and Muslims sitting and talking about their texts?

SA I think the main value is to experience how the sacred appears in the eyes of those who accept it as sacred. In other words it takes it out of the purely academic field into a devotional setting, but that devotional setting is not so devotional as to be fanatically exclusive of the other; which may sometimes happen inside a place of worship where obviously one is not in a position to question what's happening or even to ask for clarification because it's an act of worship. So this is somewhere in between the act of devotion and the act of academic scrutiny. It's true that for a lot of the Muslims, less so for the Christians, it's an unsettling experience to be reading the *Qur'an* merely as text rather than as a sacred text, meaning simply to be understanding it in the company of people who don't accept it. Having said that, the type of (Muslim) who attends *Qur'an & Bible* is likely to be relatively open about this sort of thing. I think the real challenge in the future is to see if we can get people who are more orthodox in their beliefs about their own faith to be able to sit and read the *Qur'an* along with the text of the other religions.

RB Do you have any particular memories of reading together in the *Qur'an & Bible* group?

SA Well I have one memory of a very useful discussion on the afterlife. I found that particularly enlightening. I think the Muslims were surprised to find that: there was no robust doctrine of an afterlife among Jews; Christians talk about the afterlife, but there was such a variety of opinions about it that again the Muslims were struck by the ambivalence; whereas for them this doctrine is crucial. So the fact that the three religions seem to have discrepant ideas as to what awaits us post mortem, I thought that was a particularly enlightening discussion and everyone seemed fully engaged in it, perhaps because there was some personal investment in it as to one's own mortality.

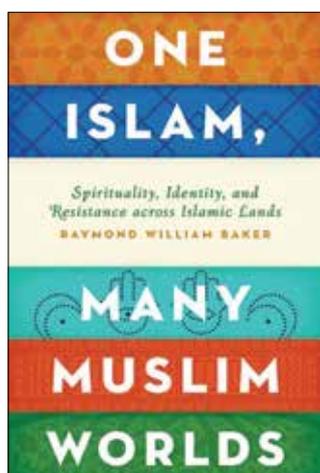


Dr Shabbir Akhtar,
Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies,
Oxford, England

BOOK REVIEW

One Islam, Many Muslim Worlds: spirituality, identity and resistance across Islamic lands By Raymond William Baker. Oxford University Press, 2015, 375pp., \$34.95

Dr Richard McCallum, fellow at the Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies



In *One Islam, Many Muslim Worlds* Raymond Baker, Professor of International Politics at Trinity College, Hartford and Adjunct Professor of Political Science at The American University in Cairo, explores the little known world of wasatiyya – or ‘centrist’ – Islam. The well-written, easy to read text provides a welcome counterbalance to those journalists, authors and politicians who present an essentialist view of Islam devoid of complexity and nuance, unaware of the rich

diversity of Muslims in the world today. Baker particularly engages with what he calls the ‘new intellectuals’ of the ‘Islamic Revival’ (p78) such as legal scholar Muhammad Ghazali (d.1996), media figures Fahmi Huwaidi and Yusuf Qaradawi, and politicians Necmettin Erbakan (d.2011), Alija Izetbegovic (d.2003) and Rashid Ghannouchi. He claims that it is these ‘heralds of Islamic Renewal’ (p60) who today influence the majority of Muslims globally.

However, Baker gives scant time to other traditions or voices within Islam and the reader is left to take his claims of centrist hegemony on trust. His gaze is fixed on what he calls the ‘Islamic strategic triangle’ (p188), the ‘three great demographic and cultural reservoirs’ of Egypt, Turkey and Iran (p275). In Baker’s recounting all great Islamic thought has hailed from these three countries. The great majority of the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims disappear into obscurity. There is no place for Asian Islam, the School of Deoband or a figure as influential as Abul A’la Maududi. ‘Retrograde Wahhabi Islam’ (p248), despite its colossal influence through the wealth of Saudi petrodollars, warrants less than a page. The Salafis generally are mentioned even less. Maybe that is because such movements do not fit with Baker’s view of ‘Islam itself’ (p246) – as though he has some authority to pronounce the correct tradition – or of Shari’a as ‘open, inclusive, and responsive to the world’ (p211). Yet these other traditions cannot and should not be ignored as they are legitimate examples of the ‘many Muslim worlds’ which Baker fails to investigate.

Indeed the title conjures up an expectation of a tour of the ‘many worlds’ inhabited by Muslims. Instead, the book is a narrowly focused exploration of one particular stream, or what the author terms ‘River of Life’, within the Muslim world.¹ A better title for the book may have been ‘One True Islam, Few Really Muslim Worlds’.

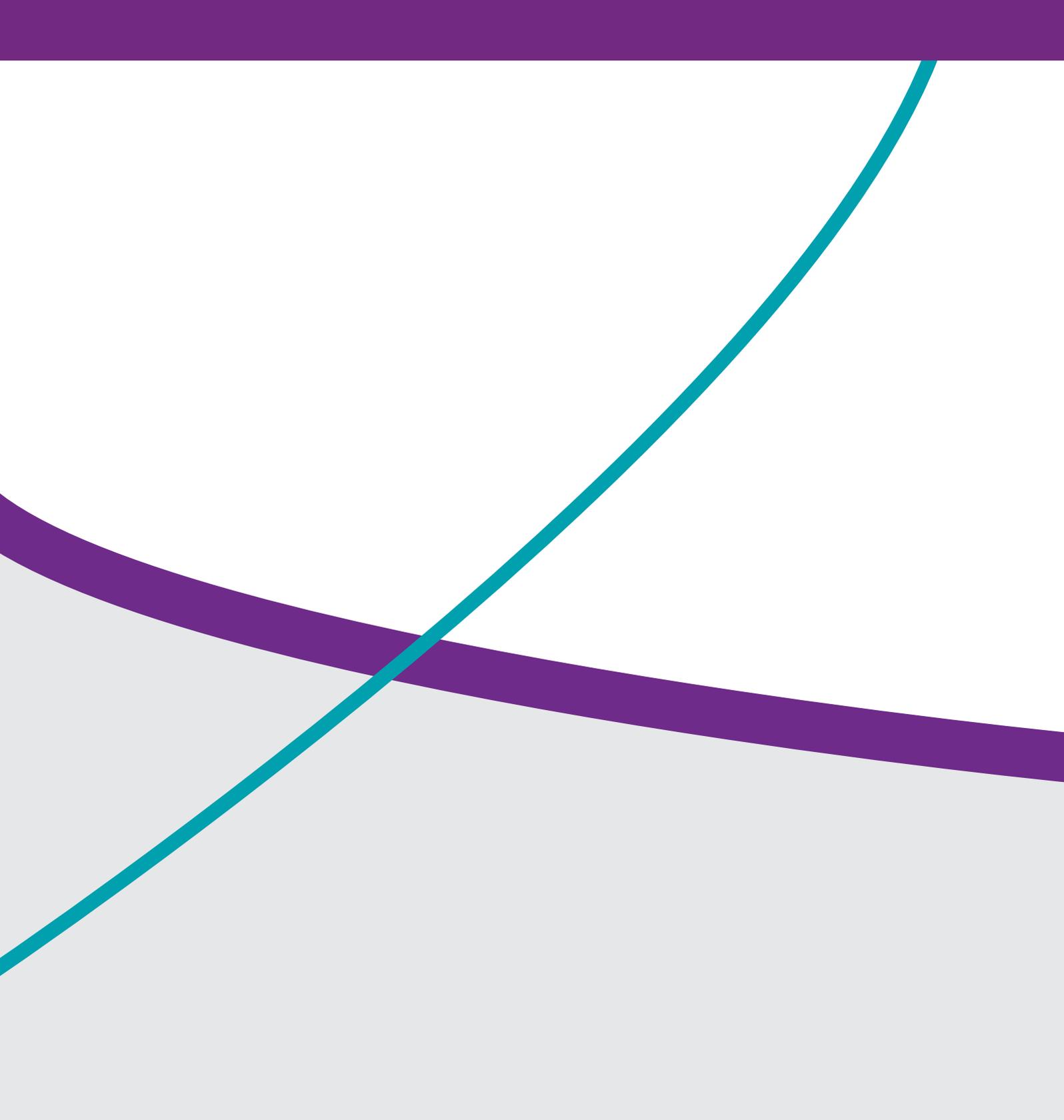
In a few sentences ‘inherited Islamic institutions like al-Azhar’, the leading Sunni university in the world, is dismissed as ‘docile official Islam’ (p78). Other displeasing interpretations of Islam which espouse violence are labelled as ‘criminal versions of Islam’ and are not deemed worthy of further discussion or explanation. Neither are more progressive Muslims such as Abdullahi an-Na’im, who advocates a secular state, or feminists such as Fatima Mernissi.²

Controversially, Baker suggests that Muslims do not need to follow the example of Muhammad literally (p216). Yet while he insists that Islam promotes equality, justice and freedom (p205) some of the thinkers that he quotes have not been so convinced. For example, both Ghazali and Qaradawi have publicly supported the death penalty for apostates from Islam.³ Not all Muslims agree with them, of course, but it will remain difficult for many non-Muslims to understand how the wasatiyya can claim to promote justice and freedom whilst such views persist.⁴

FOOTNOTES

- 1 He takes the metaphor from Muhammad Abduh, *The Theology of Unity*, (George Allen & Unwin, 1966) p.148
- 2 See An-Na’im, A., *Islam and the Secular State*, (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 2008) and Mernissi, F., *Beyond the Veil: male-female dynamics in modern Muslim society*, (London: Saqi Books, 2003)
- 3 See Tibi, B., *The Challenge of Fundamentalism: political Islam and the new world order*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998) p.155 and Qaradawi, Y., *Apostasy: Major and Minor*, <http://web.archive.org/web/20090211072313/http://www.islamonline.net/English/contemporary/2006/04/article01c.shtml##top2>, 2006 (accessed 12 January 2016)
- 4 See for more discussion Saeed, A., & Saeed, H., *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004)





THE CENTRE FOR MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN STUDIES
THE SONG SCHOOL
109A IFFLEY ROAD
OXFORD
OX4 1EH

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