

THE MUSLIM/UNITARIAN ENCOUNTER AND SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS FOLLOWING A VISIT TO THE DARUL ULOOM BIRMINGHAM ISLAMIC HIGH SCHOOL

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Darul Uloom Islamic School

INTRODUCTION

On Monday last week I had a very interesting and positive visit to the [*Darul Uloom Islamic School in Birmingham*](#). I was invited by the school's new headmaster, Dr Dawud Bone, who is an old colleague and friend of mine ([*click on this link and go to page 11 of the magazine to see the two of us together in 2009*](#)), in order to give the school assembly and then to teach three classes for eleven, fourteen and sixteen year-old student on the subject of the long, interesting and creative relationships between the early English Unitarians and Islam. [Incidentally, Dawud's grandfather, Walter Bone (1897-1944), had been a Unitarian minister at Gloucester (1937-1944) then at the Hibbert House in Alexandra, Egypt which was a Unitarian run wartime hostel.]

The school was most welcoming to me and the students were excellent and I'd like to thank them, unequivocally, for their openness and hospitality.

The address which follows the readings is an attempt both to remind my own congregation of the relationships between early English Unitarians and Islam and also to raise for consideration some of the challenges the day made upon me personally and upon the modern Unitarian movement which is, in so many respects, very different from its seventeenth-century forms. This address, and my teaching on Monday, drew heavily and gratefully upon [Justin Meggitt's](#) paper *Early Unitarians and Islam: revisiting a 'primary document'*.

But we begin with two foundational texts, the first for Muslims and the second for Unitarians.

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READINGS

Sūra 112: Devotion — Al-Ikhlās

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

Say: 'He is God. One! God the Eternal! He has not begotten and was not begotten, and He has no equal. None!'

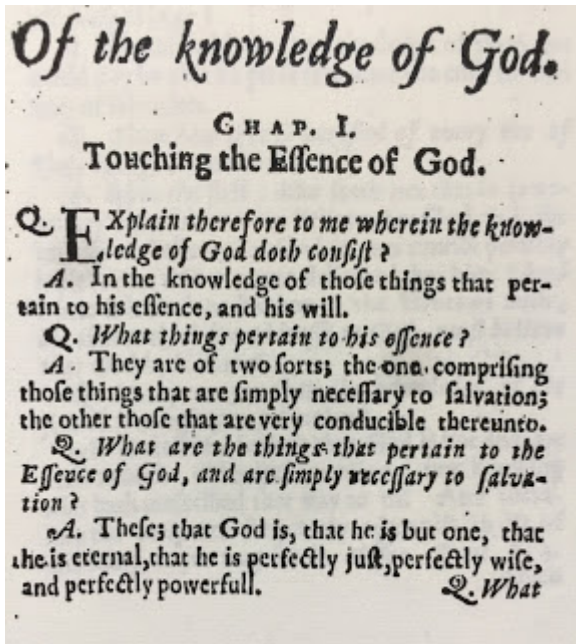
From the notes to the above chapter by [A. J. Droge in his 'The Qur'ān: A New Annotated Translation'](#), Equinox Publishing, 2014, p. 457

This sūra, assigned by most scholars to the early 'Meccan' period, is distinct for having as its title a word which does not occur in the sūra itself. The title alludes to the basic tenet of 'devoting one's religion to God exclusively'. The sūra is also known as 'The Unity' (al-Tawhid), from its emphasis on the oneness and uniqueness of God. Some have read it as directed against the Christian doctrine of the 'divine sonship' of Jesus; others see it as denying the 'pagan' belief that their goddesses were the 'daughters of God.' The liturgical ring of the sūra suggests that it may have been intended for repetition.

The verse beginning 'He has not begotten and was not begotten' looks like a denial of the Nicean (325 CE) creedal formulation about Jesus, as 'the only begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance (Gk. homoousios) with the Father.'

[Racovian Catechism](#) (Printed at Amsterdam, for Brooer Janz, 1652, pp. 14-15)

[Thomas Rees' translation of the Racovian Catechism from 1818 can be found at this link](#)



From the 1652 edition of the *Racovian Catechism*

Q. What are the things that pertain to the Essence of God, and are simply necessary to salvation?

A. These: that God is; that he is but one, that he is eternal, that he is perfectly just, perfectly wise, and perfectly powerful.

Q. What is it to know that God is?

A. To acknowledge, or at least be firmly persuaded, that he hath of himself divine Sovereignty over us.

Q. What is it to know that he is but one?

A. To acknowledge and firmly believe, that he only hath of himself divine Sovereignty over us.

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ADDRESS

The Muslim/Unitarian encounter and some personal reflections following a visit to the Darul Uloom Birmingham Islamic High School

It may come as much as a surprise to many you as it did to most of the staff and students at the school that in the seventeenth-century the early English Unitarians regularly found themselves being described as being pretty much the same as Muslims and we can find things like this said of us: that Unitarians are 'more Mahometan than Christian' and that our most important early document, the 'Racovian Catechism', was a 'Racovian Alcoran'. It's also worth noting that an

important Unitarian text published in 1690 (Arthur Bury's 'Naked Gospel') was accused of being so similar to the Qur'an that it was described as being no more than 'a Commentary on that Text.'

Here, briefly, are three other notable examples of the close connections that I introduced to the students:

[William Freke \(1662–1744\)](#) an English barrister and mystical writer from Wadham College, Oxford was very happy to praise Muhammad and the Qur'an for defending the unity of God against the errors of trinitarian Christians.

[Stephen Nye \(1648–1719\)](#) an English clergyman from Magdalene College, Cambridge and later a rector at Little Horstead, Hertfordshire, spoke well of Mohammed as someone who set out 'to restore the Belief of the Unity of GOD, which at that time was extirpated among the Eastern Christians, by the Doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation [...] Mahomet meant not his Religion should be esteemed a new Religion, but only the Restitution of the true Intent of the Christian Religion'.

And, lastly, [Arthur Bury \(1624-1714?\)](#), at one time Rector (i.e. the head) of Exeter College, Oxford who said that 'Mahomet professed all the articles of the Christian faith.'

In addition to these figures some of our seventeenth-century Christian critics also noticed that the founding figures of the Unitarian tradition in Poland and Hungary during the sixteenth-century had also, on occasions, been happy both to acknowledge that the Qur'an contained the same message of the unity of God that they proclaimed, and made use of the Qur'an to support their own case. As Justin Meggitt, notes, the Unitarian historiographer of the Polish radical reformation, Stanislas Lubieniecki, could say of [Servetus](#) [about whom we sang in our second hymn], that he 'sucked honey even out of the very thistles of the Koran in arriving at his doctrine, and in his famous trial in Geneva in 1553 he had to defend his use of the Qur'an to support his theological thought.' Indeed, a French critic of the Unitarian tradition called La Croze claimed that some of its founders 'cited the Alcoran as one of the Classick Books of their Religion'. As Meggitt notes, all in all, it is clear that the story of the birth of English Unitarianism is exceptional and that

'There is no other example of the genesis of a major Christian movement in which Islam, or indeed any other non-Christian religion, was a central, defining interlocutor, other than the birth of the early Christian church itself — although even there the parallel breaks down, as Christianity was initially a messianic sect within Judaism. At the very least the story of the origins of early English Unitarianism is not solely one of intra-Christian struggles, of arguments about reason and the scripture — or rather not solely Christian scripture.'

Now, the primary, educational reason for introducing this history to the students of the *Darul*

Uloom was because it can help show them, as another colleague of mine here in Cambridge, [Tim Winter \(Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad\)](#), has noted, that some of Islam’s central concerns — especially concerning the unity of God (‘tawhid’) and the idea that original sin did not taint human nature and mortal will (the Pelagian heresy) — have been part of these islands’ religious landscape for many centuries. It is because of this that Winter finishes his essay with these important words:

‘It is for Muslims in Britain to explore and publicise this connection. To further the prosperity and integration of their important community, British Muslim leaders should consider their place not merely amid the transient landscape of race relations commissions, halal meat issues, and local politics, but also amid the deep structures of national culture. Muslims here need to be geologists, recognising that the United Kingdom has produced many expressions of the religious quest among which they can feel a genuine sense of belonging, and which can remind them of the fundamental unity of humanity. For British Muslims, the past does not have to be “another country”’ ([British Muslim Identity: Past, problems, prospects](#)) Muslim Academic Trust, Cambridge, 2003, p. 24)

What I wanted to do at the school was simply to present to the students and teachers something of the history of the seventeenth-century Unitarian/Islamic encounter in order to excite and encourage the students to become themselves religious ‘geologists’ and able to reveal to their friends, family and neighbours that, as Muslims, the past does not have to be ‘another country’ on the other side of the world but this one, the United Kingdom — the country we all share as brother and sister human beings.

I also wanted to deliver up to them a straightforward, and heartfelt thank you for the encounter between our traditions because without it we would not have become the kind of modern liberal religious, free-thinking movement we are today. Not surprisingly, such an expression of genuine thanks is something they will rarely, if ever, have heard from a member of the Christian tradition.

Given my focus, for the most part, especially in the three excellent, hour-long classes I took after the assembly, I answered the student’s well-informed and always perspicacious questions from the perspective that could be held by a modern, believing Unitarian Christian — that is to say a liberal Christian who believes in the unity of God (in a fully theistic sense) and the role of the human of Jesus as being their central and most important example of how to live a religious life.

It was about this classic Unitarian Christian perspective that I was asked to teach and I felt able to answer most questions about it on its behalf because, notwithstanding my own personal, firmly naturalistic and non-theistic philosophy/theology, it is the religious tradition of which I am, and this church is, a genuine heir.



OF J.C. FLOWER 1922-31

J. Cyril Flower

[An example of what this faith can sound and look like when seen in an actual person can be glimpsed in these words by J. Cyril Flower, the minister of the [Cambridge Unitarian Church](#) between 1922 and 1931:

'We live in an atmosphere and a civilization whose best characteristics are steeped in the influence of Jesus. We are enlisted by birth, environment and choice, under his banner. There are other captains in the one great army of God; but he is ours, and we shall promote the success of the divine campaign for the kingdom of heaven, not by gossiping about the particular features, demeanour, or apparel of the various captains — but by lovingly and faithfully following our own; for all genuine religions are allies, and not enemies. The prophets of God are many, but God is one; and that under whatever banner India, China, England, Palestine may move forward, they may be led by their accepted captain, courageous, faithful, loving their brothers and honouring their leader, to God, should be the aspiration and the prayer of all who are disciples of Jesus of Nazareth' (From ["Aspects of Modern Unitarianism"](#), Lindsay Press, London, 1922, pp. 104-105).]

However, throughout the day, I occasionally took the opportunity gently to acknowledge and note that, when considered in its modern forms, the wider Unitarian movement is now highly plural in belief and practice such that many of its individual members are no longer classic,

Unitarian Christians. To have pretended otherwise would, of course, been to misrepresent reality. But, as I say, this wider picture was not my primary, pedagogical focus.

Now, with this point made, I arrive at the point where I am able, briefly, to place before you for your consideration what were, for me, the three most challenging social/theological/philosophical aspects of the day.

The first thing to say is that, although the students were amongst the very best and most enquiring young students I have ever taught, this was a faith school and they were all boys. This was a major challenge to me because, personally, I remain committed to the idea that the education of our country's children should take place primarily in liberal, secular contexts and that these contexts should always be, for the most part, co-educational — certainly it should be an education which visibly show that there exists a genuine equality between men and women. But, the fact remained that if my basic educational message centring on the value of Islamic/Unitarian relations is to be heard in the present environment it has to be offered in the actual contexts where an Islamic education is currently being offered — namely, for the most part, in single-sex faith schools. It is important to recall, of course, that these two issues are not confined only to the Muslim community but present in many other faith communities.

(As examiners love to say: *Discuss*).

The second challenge came because it was clear that the importance of having a religion/philosophy that can help to underpin and motivate a person's ethical engagement in the world was alive in those students in a way I simply do not see in the liberal, secular educational settings in which I usually speak and teach. As your minister, my own passion for the need to articulate a liberal, secular, scientifically literate, [religious naturalist philosophy and ethics](#) that can powerfully underpin and motivate non-theists/humanists/atheists to engage in ethical action in the world is simply not shared by the wider secular society in which I live, move and have my being. This disturbs me because I remain convinced that the secular world continues to need some kind of religion (or something religion-like) that can help guide us ethically through the coming difficult century and (for reasons often explored in this blog) I really do not think we should be contemplating making a return to, or revival of, our old religions. I need to be honest and say that, despite my genuine respect for the theistic religious traditions of the world, I continue to think that theistic conceptions of God (especially monotheistic conceptions) are always likely bring with them more religious, philosophical, ethical, social and political problems and difficulties than they have, can, or ever will solve.

(As examiners love to say: *Discuss*).

The third, related challenge is found in the widely shared Islamic belief that the Qur'an is the

authoritative, eternal and unchanging word of God exactly as recited to Mohammed sometime in the seventh century. Unsurprisingly, all the teachers in the school believe this and, both at school and in their family setting, this belief is, naturally, always-already being taught to the students. But, for me, the authoritative divine status of the Qur'an, or indeed any book (as the Bible was to our Unitarian Christian forebears and is to many Christians today), is an utterly incomprehensible belief. I simply cannot, in any shape or form, get on the inside of this belief because for me all books show up as human creations which can only be engaged with interpretively through our human imaginations and through the humanist disciplines of science, history, archeology, anthropology, philology, linguistics and so on. Following the contemporary philosopher, [Iain Thomson](#), I am fully persuaded that:

'... what makes the great texts "great" is not that they continually offer the same "eternal truths" for each generation to discover but, rather, that they remain deep enough — meaning-full enough — to continue to generate new readings, even revolutionary re-readings which radically reorient the sense of the work that previously guided us.' ([Figure/Ground Communication interview](#)).

(As examiners love to say: *Discuss*).

Perhaps, not surprisingly, I could point to a number of other pressing religious and social matters that were in play for me during my visit but these three will suffice for today's address and our open conversation to come.

So, to conclude, I simply want to say that my own positive encounter on Monday with individual Muslims, and Islam as a religion, was a powerful reminder of two things I have held, and continue to hold dear, in my own teaching of Jewish, Christian and Muslim relations.

The first is that our primary, initial duty towards each other is not to convert each other to our own religious/philosophical positions but simply **better to understand each other**.

The second is that, perhaps, the most important thing we humans can ever hope and aim for is not final agreement with each other on the many fraught and disputed fundamental matters of faith and belief, truth and falsity and so that continue to exist, but, instead, for all of us **to learn how to disagree about them in better, more humane, less violent and potentially creative ways**.

On Monday I think that we all, teachers and students alike, modelled this very well and for that, I am truly thankful.