

Cross meets crescent: An interview with Kenneth Cragg

Feature in the [February 17, 1999](#) issue

Kenneth Cragg has been a major figure in Christian-Muslim conversations. He has spent some 45 years in the Middle East as professor of philosophy, as a chaplain, and as assistant bishop in the Anglican Archdiocese of Jerusalem. He has also taught at the University of Sussex in England. His published works include hundreds of scholarly articles and more than 30 books, most recently The Arab Christian and Palestine: The Prize and Price of Zion. Now in his 80s, Bishop Cragg still lectures at Oxford University and in Europe and the U.S. We spoke to him recently at Chicago's North Park University.

You've said that Christians and Muslims should be trying to work for religious ecumenism. What does ecumenism look like from a Muslim perspective?

It depends on which Muslim you ask, of course, as it would depend on which Christian you asked. The word *ecumenae* means the whole inhabited world. But we seem to have limited it to Christian togetherness, to Christian mutuality. Couldn't we have an *ecumenae* of religions?

The ecumenical movement has adopted the position that "whatever is Christian I will try to belong with, in some sense." Can we go on to say, "I will try to belong with anything that is religious"? That, obviously, is vastly more difficult. But a good example of this happened at Temple University, where the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* is produced. The journal started out dealing only with inter-Christian issues. Then the editors said, "Why not include Jews? They're part of the *ecumenae* of Abraham. Why not Muslims?" If you begin thinking that way, soon you ask, "Why not every religion--Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism?"

The difficulty is that religion is such an omnibus term. Michael Ramsey, the former archbishop of Canterbury, once said, "Not everything religious is desirable." Would we want to align ourselves with the Hinduism that undergirds the caste system or

the Hinduism of Gandhi, which repudiates the caste system? To which Islam can Christians relate--the Islam of Afghanistan's Taliban or the Islam of academics living in the West? But with due circumspection, I think it's possible to relate to those of other faiths. We must do so with patience and modesty, with the honest recognition that the degree to which we can be together is partial, and that each faith has distinctive aspects which can't be reconciled. If we agree to agree, we must at the same time agree to disagree. Otherwise, we may be heading only for some kind of gooey sentimentalism.

In the U.S., there always seem to be far more Christians than Muslims involved in Islamic-Christian dialogue groups. Are Christians more open than Muslims to this kind of encounter?

Even those in the two faiths who are articulate and ready for dialogue do have a different kind of calendar. Christianity has had a longer confrontation with modernity than has Islam. Our experience or awareness of the issues now facing us is, consequently, different. Christians are more aware of the need to respond to pluralism.

We have to be patient until Muslims feel they are more ready for dialogue. What I often find is that the Muslim participants in dialogue groups will make a kind of set statement reiterating how they see things. You get the impression that they haven't really taken in the things the Christians have said. But at least they have been willing to respond. Many of the same issues face people of all religions--ecology, the environment, population. In all these spheres we can, to an extent, cooperate. And religions need the criticism that those of other faiths can bring.

Aren't many Muslim countries trying to shut themselves off from the West and the West's religion?

There is a very deep-seated resentment of Western power, especially of American power. It's a love-hate relationship, because these countries need Western technology and expertise. People come to the West for education, and some nations, such as Egypt and Jordan, are sustained by American aid. If you feel your culture is under threat, however, or is going to be swamped by what you regard as alien influences, or if you want to have some control over the degree to which another culture influences yours--then you may develop a mentality of resistance. We see an extreme form of this in Afghanistan. The more people see old securities threatened,

the louder they tend to shout. So in that sense, fundamentalism is itself an index of the degree of inevitable change.

Is it possible for Muslim countries to develop a non-Western modernity, an Islamic modernity?

Yes. An example is the work of Ismail al-Faruqi, a Palestinian who taught at Temple University. Faruqi promoted the idea of what he called the "Islamization of all knowledge." Faruqi thought that Western science, especially the social sciences, had a harmful influence, particularly on the young. Sociology and psychology take up the subject of religious conviction and put a question mark around faith. They imply that there is no objective reality. According to the social sciences, if we hold religious beliefs it's because we've been conditioned to do so. To combat this mind-set, it's necessary to construct a system of knowledge consistent with Islamic premises--to make the social sciences consistent with Islamic doctrines. Faruqi developed these ideas in various books, most notably *The Cultural Atlas of Islam* and *An Islamic Formulation of the Social Sciences*.

What place does fundamentalism have within the full range of Islamic faith and practice?

This is difficult to discuss, because there is no equivalent for the word "fundamentalism" in Arabic. In one sense, Islam is inherently fundamentalist in that it understands the Qur'an to be a literal dictation to Muhammad of a book in heaven. His mental processes or personal preferences are not at all involved in the text of the Qur'an. It is simply the result of a mysterious process of inspiration or revelation that comes down upon him. The orthodox view (with which I don't agree) is that Muhammad was illiterate. That makes the text of the Qur'an all the more God's word, because it couldn't have come from Muhammad. The 13th-century mystic Jalal ed-Din Rumi gives a vivid image of Muhammad's role in transmitting the Qur'an: Muhammad is like a stone lion in a garden. Out of the lion's mouth comes a spout of water. Everyone knows that a cunning plumber has contrived a pipe to use as a conduit to conduct the water through the lion.

In Islam, the more something is of God, the less the human is needed. In contrast, the biblical view is that the more the divine is giving, the more the human is recruited. The biblical prophets are vivid personalities, not ciphers. Each has his own unique style and imagery.

But the Qur'an has been considered a literal scripture from the beginning. This is what accounts for the importance of calligraphy and recitation in Islam. One mustn't make a mistake in recitation, since one is repeating the very words of God. For most Christians, the New Testament is not that kind of writing. We see it as a book about what is antecedent to itself--the person and work of Christ, the Word made flesh, teaching and suffering among us.

Though the Qur'an does need interpretation, Muslims don't approach it with the kind of almost overconfidence that sometimes marks Christian exegesis of the Bible. A Muslim once said to me, "You play fast and loose with your scripture." That is how Muslims react to our sense that we need to discern what the text could mean--especially, for example, when we deal with the Gospel of John. We question whether we can accept the text as giving us the actual words of Jesus, as we think the parables do. Why do Jesus' words sound so different in the Fourth Gospel? What is John doing here? Those are legitimate questions for us, questions that are a part of the integrity of our faith. One Muslim has referred to "the liquidity of the Christian scriptures as you treat them." He says it's like the liquidity of capital--we make it do what we want it to do.

Another factor is that Muslims understand Islam as the final religion, and Jesus as the next-to-last in a long succession of prophets. The Qur'an is the book that perfects and, if need be, corrects all previous revelation, going right back to Abraham. That gives Muslims an enormous sense of finality, which tends to preclude a will to be really critical or even investigative about what they believe.

Is there a place for historical criticism in Islam, the kind of criticism Western scholars started applying to the biblical text in the 18th century?

Not that kind of textual criticism. But Muslims do have a principle of exegesis: the horizontal plain of Muhammad's revelation, which he received over 23 years, from 609, when he was 40, until his death in 632. To understand the text, you need to know what Muslims call the "occasions of revelation," that is, when and in what circumstances a verse or chapter came to Muhammad. The context is the clue to the content.

There's a second very interesting interpretive question that some Muslims will recognize and take up, but others tend to ignore because it's too daunting--they see it as a slippery slope. The question has to do with the finality of the text. Why does

this final revelation come to Arabia in the seventh century of the Christian era? How do we take a revelation there and then into the 20th-century global culture?

We now have all sorts of issues that technology off-loads onto ethics. How do we behave about birth control? How do we respond to the idea of international human rights now that we have the United Nations and the concept of common human values? Can we still hold that what happens in our country is our own affair, and that no others have a right to intrude? Does world opinion have the right to concern itself with how women are treated in Saudi Arabia? The 20th century is very different from the seventh. You can claim that the revelation is final, but it becomes a museum piece unless it continues to apply to your time.

How might Muslims--and Christians--deal with these intellectual problems now confronting Islam?

There are ambiguities in the Qur'an, and passages that can be interpreted in different ways. One can, for example, base the argument for the equality of the sexes on certain Qur'anic passages. And there are articulate and courageous Muslim women--like Fatima Mernissi in Morocco--who are making this point. It's important for us not to say, "Look here, the West has Jeffersonian values about the rights of women, values we'd like to see you adopt," but to argue instead from the Qur'an itself, citing verses like the one stating that God has ordained love and tenderness between the male and female in marriage, or that no man has two hearts in one bosom. I take that to mean that polygamy is impossible because no man can love two wives equally.

Even the verse that has been interpreted for centuries as giving men permission to marry up to four women says a man can do so only if he treats them all equally. But what does equality mean in this context? If it means dividing the budget equally between the wives or spending an equal number of nights with each, then it's feasible to marry more than one. But if it means having an equal affection of the heart for each, the proviso is unattainable and the permission lapses. By this exegesis, the verse does not legitimate plural marriage; it requires monogamy. This is the kind of exegesis by which women can have the text on their side. And it's not dishonest to do this.

On the interfaith question, the Qur'an contains passages that say God himself ordained human diversity in order that people might compete together to be the

best. God has sanctified diverse cultures by giving each a pattern of worship, a ritual to follow. Another verse says that there is no people to whom a prophet has not been sent. Does that make Socrates a prophet to the Greeks? Is the Buddha a prophet? Of course, there are other verses that seem to restrict pluralism. If a text is ambiguous, you might as well interpret it in the ways that seem the best and most just. That's how reformers work.

What do you make of the current U.S. focus on curbing the persecution of Christians in other countries, particularly Islamic countries?

We must, of course, try to make sure that religious persecution isn't covered up, and we must try to get the facts straight, avoiding exaggeration. I think that the best way to approach this problem is to promote liberty of conscience for people of all faiths, not just for Christian minorities. Liberty of soul and the freedom to change one's religious affiliation are human rights that should be asserted on behalf of all.

We must be concerned with how Muslim, as well as Christian, minorities are treated in Islamic countries. We must be concerned about the Muslim scholars who are persecuted in their own countries or are forced into exile. We don't want our concern about religious persecution to come across as a Western power's concern about Christians only. We want to dispel the old suspicion that the Christians in the East provide a way for Western interests to gain a toehold in Eastern societies. Christians in places like Egypt and Palestine want to cast their lot with the others of their own societies; they don't want to be thought of as dubious citizens. We don't want to compromise their situations still more by making them seem a kind of enemy in the camp.

What about the Muslim minorities in the West?

A big dilemma for Muslims today is that many have lost the shelter of the Islamic state. About a quarter of the world's Muslims live as minorities in places where they must practice Islam as "just a religion," to use a Western phrase. For them, Islam is a system of worship and ethics and a community, but not a source of social and political power.

There is a precedent for this in Islam in the first 13 years of Muhammad's mission. There are passages in the Qur'an where God says that Muhammad has no responsibility except to preach the message. It wasn't until after the Hijrah-- Muhammad's flight from Mecca to what became Medina--in 622 that Islam became a

political force.

Now many Muslims find themselves in that pre-Hijrah situation in which the faith began. If we believe in the hand of God behind historical developments, then today's Muslim diaspora--Turks in Germany, Algerians in France, Pakistanis in Britain, Indonesians in Holland, people from many Islamic countries in Canada and the U.S.--seems a call for Muslims to coexist with those of other religions. Many Muslims are being called to live in varying circumstances, as fellow citizens, voting, getting elected, taking part in local and national government--but all in the context of remaining a minority, with the psychological uncertainty that all minorities experience.

What problems does Islam without statehood pose for Muslims, and what effect might it have on Islam?

I think that this is, paradoxically, a realm of hope for the world and for Islam. Muslims in this condition are forced to interrogate the very core of their faith. How can Islam be true, full and authentic when it lacks one element that historically has been understood as a sine qua non of the faith? Two new journals in Britain are devoted to thinking through this problem: the *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* and the *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*. The brochure for the latter states that it is open to the free exercise of scholarship in the interpretation of the Qur'an and invites non-Muslims to share in the debate.

The rise of Muslim minority populations makes urgent the question of international law: What is the appropriate treatment for religious minorities? To its credit, Islam has a long tradition of conditional toleration for Jewish and Christian minorities, to whom it gives dhimmi status--the freedom to practice their religion, and to educate their progeny in it, on condition that they submit politically to the Islamic state. In some places this took the form of a kind of contract: a minority had to submit or forfeit its right to remain in the country. Such an approach is not viable in the modern world, where we have the concept of equal citizenship. The status of minorities must not include political subservience.

The position of Muslim minorities raises the whole question of the nature of religious authority. Can Islam move toward accepting the secular state--secular in the sense that the state treats equally citizens of any and every tradition, consonant with public order and the common good? There is, of course, always prejudice against

minorities on the part of majorities; there are all kinds of ways to put minorities in an inferior position. But the ideal of the secular state--that all may be what they are, that believers in all faiths are common subjects of the state--can be argued on the basis of Islam itself, if one goes back to pre-Hijrah times and to the concept of the *dhimmi*. This makes religion a private affair in terms of how the government views religious practice. But it does not imply that belief is nothing more than a private option. It doesn't require the kind of secularity that means nobody has any belief at all. We need urgently to make this distinction. As Islam recognizes its vocation to be just a religion in situations where it is a minority faith, the quality of Islamic faith in its cohesion and understanding of compassion can contribute to the common good of other faiths as well.

International law requires us to get away from the notion that national boundaries are frontiers across which ideas may not cross. The concept of international human rights from which no country is exempt is consonant with the idea that Shari'a, the large body of legal tradition that informs the Muslim community about how God requires it to live, is in some sense the rule of God.

How might Christians counter the view that Islam is a great threat to Western civilization?

This image of a confrontation between Islam and the West is much more prevalent in the U.S. than it is in Europe, and the American media seem to promote it. But we can give the lie to this reading of history. There is an understanding, both Christian and Muslim, that we should keep in mind: With what measure you mete, it shall be meted out to you. In other words, the way you treat another party is likely to contribute to the response that party makes to you. If you are ready to assume a capacity that is positive and reciprocal, there's a better chance that you will find it.

A verse from the Sermon on the Mount is very appropriate to this context--"Judge not and you shall not be judged." Like many of the sayings of Jesus, this could be misread. It doesn't mean that you should never have an opinion. The point is that your judgment is an index to your character. The way we judge has a way of judging us. Our judgments must be based on a perceptive honesty and a wide compassion. When two cultures accuse each other of satanism, the only one who gains is Satan himself.

The openhearted observer of Islam in the West can discern the shape of hope in the increasing willingness of people of the two faiths to come together for dialogue and

consultation on the mutual problems they face; in the reevaluation of Islam forced upon Muslims by their minority status in many places; and in the development of the concept of international law and universal human rights. We must do our best to contribute to the fulfillment of that hope.