The Certainty Trap
Bill Musk about his own book

Nobody needs convincing that religion figures significantly in some of the major controversies currently embroiling our world in violence. On the surface it might appear that confident people of faith know exactly what they are convinced about, to the extent that they are prepared to struggle for the domination of their particular view over all others. A look under the surface, however, suggests hints of internal insecurity within each faith – I am here thinking especially of Islam and Christianity, though the claim might well be applied to other faiths at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

I am convinced that there is a current struggle going on for the soul of Islam which is mirrored by an equivalent struggle for the soul of Christianity. Those twin struggles are at their heart focused around convictions about the certainty to be derived from written, holy texts.

Within Islam, such struggle has been provoked by the insistent and powerful voices and deeds of Islamists within recent decades. Those Islamist voices have insisted that theirs is a more faithful obedience to the Qur’an. The owners of such voices see themselves as taking the divine word literally, unlike the majority of their orthodox, fellow-Muslims. In consequence, they announce themselves as truly muslim, authentically submitted to God. The matter of jihâd constitutes a potent nub of the friction between Islamists and their fellow religionists. Did God order jihâd or not? If he did, did God intend for that jihâd to be a sort of spiritual battle against the world, the flesh and the devil, or did God rather intend it to be a physical battle against his enemies? How did Prophet Muhammad respond to the command to wage war on God’s behalf? Did he spiritualise the command or literally obey the command? To Islamists it is obvious what the plain answers to such questions amount to.

Within Western Christianity, especially, part of the worldview of rightwing or fundamentalistic evangelicals allows a view of Muslims as particularly standing in the way of all that God intends for the world today. In the USA especially, twenty-first century evangelicals have boldly proposed a facing up to some of the breakdown and moral bankruptcy within their society as a whole. The (laudable) concern of such a “moral majority” for their own nation is nurtured within a theology that has much to say about God’s action in the wider world. Christian fundamentalists, representatives of whom have tended to gain disproportionate access to policy makers at national level, propose an end-time scenario that pits the people of God against the enemies of God in a desperate battle eventuating in Armageddon. The enemies of God, quickly re-identified since the fall of communist USSR in 1991 as including particular Muslim regimes
or movements, constitute an “axis of evil” that needs defeating.

If Muslims generally believe that literally obeying God’s word is the duty of Muslims – and they do – how do they deal with those who claim that theirs is a more faithful obedience or submission than their own? The Islamists seem to have grabbed the moral and theological high ground. They are the ones martyrizing themselves in a fight against a rampant, Western, “Christian” oppressor and seeking, in doing so, to fight in the way of God. They are the ones Trumpeting that their interpretation of Qur’ân is more in line with the heritage derived from Prophet Muhammad’s own example.

If Christians, especially evangelical Christians, believe that the Bible is the word of God – and they do – how do they deal with those who claim that theirs is a more faithful obedience to that Word than their own? The fundamentalistic evangelicals are the ones with a clear, biblical view on what is going on within their own nation and within the world as a whole. Theirs is a black and white, all or nothing message: “This is God’s will! These are God’s enemies! It’s in the Bible!” How do you argue with that without looking suspiciously unfaithful to Scripture or unprepared to stand up for what God would want?

The Certainty Trap tries to carve some space for both Muslims and Christians – orthodox believers of each faith – to stand up and be counted. In both religions, the fundamentalists need to be challenged on their hermeneutics, on their approaches to the interpretation of holy text. That challenge requires a review of how the relevant holy texts came to be – is the history all squeaky clean, or are there some murky, less transparent parts to the stories? How have religious texts historically been received or responded to, both within Islam and Christianity? What kind of dynamics bear upon the interface between divine author, human transmitter(s), recipients and interpreters of holy Scripture?

Within Islam, this is a delicate issue, for the historic bent of Islam is towards fundamentalism, towards literalism. The Qur’ân is seen as “sent down”, entire and complete via the (willing but unengaged) Prophet Muhammad so that what Muslims now have in their hands as “recitation” (qur’ân) is what God has recited from eternity. It is God’s text vouchsafed to humankind. There are many examples, however, both historically and contemporaneously, of Muslims who have come up with vigorous and dynamic reflections on how the Qur’ân might be differently conceived of, received and interpreted. Sadly, today, most of such creative and serious alternative expressions can only find safe voice from within the protection of residence in the West. In The Certainty Trap we sample some of the offerings from an Iranian, a Pakistani, some Egyptians, an Algerian and a South African.

Within Christianity, especially at the evangelical end of the spectrum, this is a delicate issue as well. Anything that looks like an undermining of the adamancy of “infallibility” or “inerrancy” brings suspicion on the proponent of a more
open hermeneutic. Often, also, any suggestion that fulfillment of prophecy concerning the restoration of Zion does not necessarily equate with the ups and downs of the current Zionist State of Israel looks to many evangelicals as smacking of unfaithfulness. In *The Certainty Trap* we look at some ways of handling Scripture that take text, context, exegetical intent and interpretative intent seriously. I hope that excursions into those areas come across as both faithful and provocative.

The purpose, then, of *The Certainty Trap* is to proffer some seed-thoughts that might engender a more open space in which to deduce a faithful treatment of holy texts that does not inevitably or a priori capture them to a literalist or fundamentalist hermeneutic – either within Islam or within Christianity.

That proffering has, inevitably, required some consideration of an opposite trap or entrapment – especially in the case of Western Christianity, including evangelicalism.

I have referred to this “opposite” issue as the “uncertainty trap”. Our modern Western world finds itself allergic to any claim to universal truth, any declaration of overarching meaning, any submission to a meta-text. In this Western milieu, I am calling for some certainty, some sureness, at least in the Christian story. I do believe that the Bible is more than simply manuscript. How are modern-day, Western sceptics (Christians and all!) to be convinced of the authenticity of Scripture? Their conviction is that Scripture is time-bound and expressive of cultures and thought processes that were strongly informed by such prejudices as masculine pride, racism, tribalism, elitism and so on. The normal “modern” way of reading Scripture is to relegate it to “that was good for those folk then” but today to ignore it for its quaint or not-so-quaint anti-feminism and homophobia or its endorsement of ethnic cleansing. I make some suggestions in the context of church life in the West and relationships across the faiths as to how the uncertainty trap might be challenged or forswn.

Where does certainty, or sureness, or reliability lie for people of faith especially where such faith is predicated upon a holy text? In a manner that hopefully goes beyond the neo-orthodoxy of Barth, I make some suggestions concerning our engagement with holy texts and especially, in my own case, with the Bible. I am convinced that orthodox believers, both Muslim and Christian, need to do some urgent public thinking and declaring on this important matter before the whole world simply gives up on religion in a “plague on both your houses” desperation. Christians might like to consider: how could Jesus live most faithfully by God’s word, say some of the most harsh things ever mouthed about hell and judgment, and yet live consistently in servant mode, self-humbling mode, obedient- unto-death mode, laying aside stereotypes and swords? How might we, in our time, find ourselves both convinced and “not yet totally certain” believers?

*Bill Musk*
HOW TO OBTAIN A COPY OF THE CERTAINTY TRAP.

Within the United Kingdom: directly from Bill Musk. The cost per copy is £11.00 plus £1.50 p&p: total £12.50. For quantities greater than one, postage costs will be calculated on an individual order basis. Cheques payable to Bill Musk: please send with orders for single copy to:

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ENDORSEMENTS

“Bill Musk is an extremely insightful author of several well-received books on Islam. The Certainty Trap is his most provocative book. Musk protests simplistic interpretations of difficult Koranic and Biblical passages. He issues an impassioned plea for Muslims and Christians to humbly examine their scriptures in a manner that would lead to a faith that eschews violence and embraces a quest for peaceful co-existence. For a mind-expanding experience, I can do no better than recommend Musk’s latest production.”

Phil Parshall, SIM: Missionary-At-Large

“This book can be trusted because it was conceived in the writer’s own tears, nurtured by his research and is delivered in his usual perceptive style. Bill Musk identifies us all as both witnesses and perpetrators of the religious ‘certainty trap’ and he retrieves us to a more humble faith in the sovereign Lord of history.”

Steve Bell, Interserve: National Director designate England & Wales

“In his latest book, Bill Musk has offered the struggles and insights of his own personal journey as an evangelical Christian and a scholar reading the Bible to those who read the Quran as sacred text. From his experience and scholarship he provides to Christians and Muslims who seek the voice of God in scripture, an effective response to those who claim a literalist reading
to be the only faithful account. He is concerned to challenge those whose approaches are unable to give a responsible account of the actual nature of the texts. This is a work undertaken in humility and in respect for both Christian and Islamic scripture; for many it will be a breath of fresh air and for others it will be a difficult but desirable challenge. I warmly commend this as a work of courage, faithfulness and integrity.”

*Canon Guy Wilkinson, Church of England Inter Faith Relations Adviser*