

A Relevant Understanding of the Challenge of Islam

The number one “confrontation” of the 21st century will be between Islam, secular States & Christianity.

In my experience, few Christians take time to understand what Islam teaches and consider how to respond to its claims. To ignore Islam is like putting our head in the sand. It is important that we appreciate the nature of the mission of those who follow the teachings of Mohammed, and the Biblical response, if we are to be both informed and effective in reaching Muslims with the Gospel. Only then will we be positioned to meet this charismatic movement head on with the truth and see people set free to have a genuine encounter with God.

Why Talk About Islam?

Islam is the world’s second largest religion. It is growing rapidly and visibly. It is aggressively anti-Christian. In strict Muslim countries churches are illegal. Conversion (“apostasy”) is frequently a capital offence. Muslims in the West are active and determined. *TIME* magazine recently estimated that, by the end of the 21st Century, Islam will be the predominant religion in France and growing quickly elsewhere throughout Europe.

How would Father God respond to Islam? What is the appropriate “Great Commission” paradigm? There is a lot of excellent material around today, much of it written by former Muslims. Some popular texts are alarmist and focus more on the threat of Islam than presenting Christ to the Muslim world. My purpose here is to summarize the key issues, discuss areas where Islam and Christianity appear to run on parallel tracks, identify differences between the two and suggest ways to reach Muslim friends with the Gospel.

Radicalization and paranoia

Events over the past several years (the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York in 2001; the Taliban rule in Afghanistan; religious war in Algeria; sectarian strife in Nigeria; terrorism in Yemen, Bali, Madrid and London; the invasion of Iraq, ongoing threats against potential western targets by the loose Al Qa’eda network, to name a few) have drawn attention to Islam. The resultant emphasis on a “War Against Terror” has blamed propagation of Islam in Western societies. Documentaries like *Fahrenheit 9/11* influenced the thinking of some, for a few minutes, but stem from a humanistic mind-set. It is important that we have a Christian response, not a populist reaction.

Beginnings

In order to understand Islam, it is essential to go back to the beginning. Mohammed was born in Mecca in the year 570 as a member of the Quarish tribe, which claimed descent from Abraham’s son Ishmael (see Genesis 16). He worked as a trader, frequently meeting Jews and heretical Christians (including Nestorians, who denied key aspects of the nature of Jesus Christ) on his travels and observing internecine struggles in the early church. At the age of 25 he married a wealthy 40 year-old widow named Khadija. He had numerous wives and one child, a daughter named Fatima.

From the age of 40, Mohammed began to claim revelations, or “recitations” (lit. Qur’an) about God from “the Archangel Gabriel”. His message called for rejection of the prevailing crude polytheism, in the face of judgment to come. He was initially opposed by the majority of Meccans. Persecuted because of his dogmatism, Mohammed fled with his followers to the city of Medina in 622. This flight, or “hijra”, marked the beginning of the Muslim calendar. Nine years later, when his forces were strong enough, he defeated Mecca, smashed most of its idols and established Islam as the official religion.

After his death in 632, the Muslim community was divided. Bitter arguments over succession led to a major split, with the majority (Sunnis) following the elected Caliphs and a smaller group (Shi’ites) supporting claims by his descendants. Islam has been divided ever since. Other denominations include the Allawites (a heretical branch of Shi’ism, based mainly in Syria), Sufis (a mystical branch), Druze (followers of an Egyptian sect, in the Lebanese and Israeli mountains, Druze communities are exclusive, claim “secret” knowledge and believe in reincarnation), Wahabis (very strict; they control Saudi Arabia) and the Ahamadiya sect (Syria).

Within a hundred years of Mohammed’s death, Islam spread beyond the Middle East and conquered an area larger than the Roman Empire. Dynasties shifted from Mecca to Damascus, then Baghdad. In 711 Muslim armies stormed the Iberian Peninsula and remained for nearly eight centuries (the last citadel of the Moors, Granada, fell in 1492). European monarchs and secularized Christianity responded with a series of disastrous “crusades” from 1095 until 1270. (Muslims today continue to recall the atrocities of the crusades, while downplaying centuries of cruelty associated with the spread of Islam). In Eastern Europe, Seljuk Turks conquered the Byzantine capital of Constantinople (modern Istanbul) in 1453, and continued west, before being stopped at Vienna in 1683 (it is still possible to view portions of walls that kept the rest of the continent from Islamization). Ottoman rulers exploited the power of Islam until that empire collapsed during World War One.

Today, there are nearly a billion Muslims. The heartlands of Islamic tradition are Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran. Vast oil revenues and rapid travel enable expansion of political, economic and cultural influence and presence.

What makes a Muslim?

Muslims reject the title “Mohammedanism”, preferring Islam, or “submission” to God (a Muslim is one who “submits”). Their tenets are contained in the Koran and Hadith (the sayings and doings of Mohammed). The deliberations of Islamic scholars (the “ulema”) and opinion of the world-wide community of Muslims (the “umma”) also influence Islamic interpretation and jurisprudence.

Anyone can become a Muslim. There are five simple steps.

The first step is the “*Shahada*”, or confession of faith. “*There is one God, Allah, and Mohammed is the messenger of Allah.*” Islam is monotheistic. (So are Judaism and Christianity.) There is only one God, the creator and ruler of all. In some parts of the world, however, folk Islam is syncretistic, accommodating local deities alongside Allah.

The remaining four pillars of faith are: prayer (“salat”), five times a day, facing Mecca; alms-giving (“zakat”) of 2% of income to the poor; fasting in daylight hours during Ramadan (the 9th month) and “Hajj” (pilgrimage to Mecca, the birthplace of Mohammed), at least once in a person’s lifetime.

For many Muslims, there is a 6th pillar of faith, *Jihad* (Holy War); Muslims who die undertaking “jihad” are considered martyrs and assured a place in Paradise, a place where many pleasures forbidden on earth are available. Islamic apologists in the West claim that “jihad” is properly understood as an inner struggle, aimed at defeating temptation, human weaknesses and passion. Living in the Middle East for several years convinced me that, for many Muslims, “jihad” is a literal conflict with non-Muslims. The Koran encourages holy war, exhorting the faithful to, “Kill them where you find them”.

Islam is an external, “works-based” religion that emphasizes human effort. Muslims are often referred to as the “faithful”, however adherence to this system requires compliance based on fear and societal pressures, not faith.

The Muslim world view

The Muslim world view is predicated on One God, one Prophet (so-called), one religion, world-wide domination and conversion of non-Muslims to the “will of God”. Sharia government (social organisation and legal systems based on Islamic values) is preferred. Western governments legislating religious equality are hoodwinked if they cannot see that what is at stake is the freedom they enjoy. Strict Muslims reject our way of life. Their goal is Islamisation of the entire human race. For the practicing Muslim, faith and daily life are intricately intertwined. While church and state were disestablished in the West centuries ago, the Muslim believes mosque and state are inseparable. Muslim strategists foreshadow that globalisation will be accomplished by political measures, rapid population growth, missionary endeavour (eg students in Western universities and obligatory conversion to Islam through marriage), exploitation of freedoms guaranteed in the West; the appeal of equality in class-based societies; and a clearly defined eschatology.

Muslims strive to be a social force in the West, by establishing organisations; promoting Islamic awareness and culture to advance their cause (freedoms are extinguished when Muslim control is achieved). While ideologically opposed to non-Islamic Government, such organisations use immigration, citizenship, “political correctness” and the law to counter or extinguish Christian influence, preventing soul winning and crippling churches through actions in the courts. An acquaintance was financially ruined by an Islamic Council who took civil action against him for “vilifying Islam” when he and a friend spoke about the nature of Islam at a church conference. The Council had planted sympathizers in the meeting to gather information that was then used against the church. This duplicity pervades the Middle East. While Governments in many Islamic countries prohibit the establishment of churches (even in the homes of believers) and imprison Christians for gathering to worship God (even where all participants are identifying Christians), Muslim organisations nevertheless use religious tolerance guaranteed in the West to demand the right to build mosques and engage in aggressive evangelism. They see no contradictions in such double standards.

Other areas where Islamic organisations seek to gain footholds, with a view to domination, include education and training; the media; social organisations; economic institutions and think-tanks; political parties; health, sports and recreation policies; law and justice; care for migrants, refugees, the aged, disabled and destitute citizens and the rehabilitation of prisoners.

Points of similarity and departure

In common with Christians, Muslims are Monotheistic. They believe God is creator; merciful, just and omniscient. They believe in many Biblical characters (eg Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Lot, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Elijah, Elisha, Jonah, Ezekiel, John), albeit with a different spin. They believe Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, performed miracles and will come again. They believe in submission to God; faith; life-long commitment to religious obedience, a world-wide “community” of believers, a coming Day of Judgment, life after death, angels, demons, eternal reward for the faithful and Hell for unbelievers. But is theology alone enough?

Muslims do not believe that Jesus was God, or the Son of God, but teach that he was merely a prophet. Muslims point to the promise of Jesus that he would send a “Comforter” (see John 14-16), claiming it was fulfilled in the coming of Mohammed and that Jesus was superseded by Mohammed. Muslims do not believe that Jesus was crucified, died, was buried or rose again. They reject the thesis that God could have humbled Himself, become a man, a sacrifice for sin, as taught in the Bible (Philippians 2:5-11). Koranic versions of many Biblical accounts are historically inaccurate, eg in the Koran Ishmael, not Isaac, is offered as sacrifice by Abraham; Haman (a Persian official who plotted to destroy Jews during the time of Xerxes and Esther) appears as a servant of Pharaoh (there is no accounting for this historical anachronism); and the baker in Joseph’s dream is “crucified” (in spite of the fact that crucifixion was not devised until more than a millennium later).

Muslim misunderstandings

Muslims associate Christians with the excesses of the Crusades; the reconquest of Spain; the tragedy of Palestine; and massacres of Muslims in Bosnia during the conflict in the Balkans in the 1990s. When US President George W Bush launched military actions in Iraq in 2003 he referred to the action as a “crusade”, a poor choice of words that stirred up ancient bitterness. Arab Muslims believe Europeans are “Christians” and link Western mores (immorality, drug addiction, alcoholism, commercialism of religion and secularism) to the effects of Christianity. Muslims assert that Christians are idolatrous (citing Mariology and statues in churches), claiming that we worship three separate gods called “Trinity” (God the Father, Mary and Jesus - there appears to have been no attempt, on the part of Mohammed, to sort out misunderstanding from facts when it came to rendering Biblical records). They point to the lukewarm commitment to God on the part of many believers as evidence Christians are not serious about worship. Islamic scholars insist (without adducing any reliable evidence or refuting the oldest archeological records) that Jews and Christians changed the Scriptures. They claim to be more zealous for God than most professing Christians, but do not realize this attribute alone does not impress God (see Romans 10:2-4 and Matthew 5:20).

Christian misunderstandings

On the other hand, many Christians entertain misconceptions about Islam, often based on racial and cultural stereotypes. Let’s look at a couple of examples. One claim is that all Muslims are polygamists. Simultaneous polygamy does exist in some Muslim societies (serial polygamy is more common in the West). Apologists for Islam will tell you that additional wives are only taken where the first wife agrees and the husband is able to provide financial support. The reality is much harsher. A Muslim man who does not get his way will simply divorce the non-compliant woman (for whom divorce will be a life-long stigma) and marry another. However, not all Muslims are polygamists. I have Muslim friends for whom stability, love and a strong home life based on life-long commitment to one spouse are paramount.

Then there is the myth that Muslims worship the moon. “Look at any mosque; there is a crescent. The term ‘Allah’ comes from the name of an ancient Arabian deity. Remember the Daughters of Allah”. These assertions sound plausible but they are without foundation and are unhelpful. The names “Al” and “El” are derivations of the same ancient name that simply means “God” or “Lord” (vide Ba-al and El-ohim). There are very strong philological links between the two. Abram’s family originally worshipped stars. Muslims today are fiercely monotheistic. They no more think of stars when worshipping Allah than do the descendants of Abram. What’s more, Christians in the Arab world, in Indonesia and other parts of the world read “Allah” in their Bibles and pray using the term “Allah”, as do Arabic speaking Jews, because the word means “God”. If we are to be effective witnesses for Christ in a world where Islam is active we need to be wary of accepting silly and counterproductive errors. Relevant Christianity distinguishes between fact and fiction.

Another stereotype relates to the “hijab” or “burqa”. Wearing the veil is a tradition that has its roots in pre-Islamic cultures. In parts of the world, Christian women wear veils. Clothing alone does not make the person.

A further stereotype is the notion that all Muslims are “fundamentalists” who support terrorism and suicide bombers. True, many suicide bombers in the Middle East are Muslims, but to persist with this stereotype is to mirror the Islamic notion that all Christians are Crusaders (which was not the case).

Finally, consider the stereotype that “Christian-Muslim dialogue” will change hearts. This is a fallacy. By all means, engage in dialogue, however (from what I have seen in such conferences) most Muslims expect the dialogue to go one way. I’m not convinced it improves understanding.

Felt needs of individuals

Everyone has felt needs. Islam teaches that God is eternal, know all things, is Almighty, does what He wants, hears every sound, sees all things and speaks, but without a tongue. Muslims attribute 99 names to God. However, they do not believe they can know God. As is the case with many religions, worship of God in Islam is erroneously linked to “place”, particularly the Ka’ba in Mecca. When traveling in the Middle East it is common for aircraft screens and arrows on the ceilings of hotels to point to Mecca. Sadly, the apex of a Muslim’s life is obligatory pilgrimage to a place, not a relationship with God.

There are clear weaknesses in Islamic theology. These include assumptions of hyper-predestination (“insh’allah”, if God wills it; implying we are powerless to decide for ourselves); emphasis on the temporal (cf John 3:6); contradictions between theory and praxis, eg the treatment of women & non-Muslims; ways around “rules”; limitation of the Koran to the Arabic language; claims that God is “compassionate” and “merciful”, but religion is anchored in legalism without mercy, duty and ritual (cf Romans 3:26). Muslims have no theological concept of God’s grace; kindness and love, His mercy for them, as individuals; His transforming power over sin; the promise and practice of His personal presence and relationship; or the gift of eternal life.

Muslims do not know peace with God. They have no promise of forgiveness of sin; no confidence their prayers will be heard or answered; no assurance they will go to Paradise; do not know whether their lives please or offend God; are forced to rely on their own strength to follow commandments made by man for man, often cannot read the Koran (because they do not know Arabic); and do not know how to conquer evil they know exists around them. They are “without God and without hope in the world” (Ephesians 2:12 cf 1 Peter 3:15).

Witnessing to Muslims

Christ died for Muslims (John 3:16). So how do we reach them with the Gospel? I believe we need to start by understanding Islam and its global agenda. Touching hearts is more than arguing about differences. It is easy to win the polemic and lose the person. Too many Christians are caught up in populist anti-Muslim sentiments and the rhetoric of the “War Against Terror”, forgetting that these are secular strategies that do not reflect Godly values.

Seek out Muslims and love them as you would any other non-Christian. There is no difference between a Muslim, Hindu, atheist or your apathetic next door neighbour who believes in God but not much else. Love them as God loves them. The initial reaction may be one of caution. (The Koranic warns

against befriending Christians.) Jesus died on the cross for your Muslim friend. He took the sins of the most rabidly anti-Christian sheikh and calls him in love to repentance and faith. Draw a distinction between the system and the individual. Show patience, not hostility. Have a strong relationship with God. Model your faith, "submitted" to God. Have confidence in God's Word. Invite your Muslim friends to church, to see Christians praying, singing and worshipping God. Don't debate Israel's right to exist. (Jerusalem is the third most holy site in the Islamic world, after Mecca and Medina. For Muslims, the "loss" of Jerusalem to British, then Israeli, forces after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and creation of Israel rankles.) Ask God for wisdom to address misunderstandings. Pray for miracles in their lives. (The majority of people I know, who grew up as Muslims and became Christians, did so after they had a dream, vision, healing or other miraculous work by Jesus.)

If the Gospel we preach is real, it must be real to Muslims around the world, around our neighbourhood, who need an encounter with the Living Christ, more than a Prophet, the Saviour who came to give them eternal life. Reach out to your Muslim friends, show them by your words and actions the reality of your relationship with God. Then allow the Holy Spirit to release saving faith in their lives.