

## The World of Islam

“Never has the world known a more Anti-Christian faith,  
and never has the church of Jesus Christ encountered  
a greater challenge to everything which is dear to its heart!”  
(Bassam M. Mandy: *The Bible and Islam: Sharing God's Word with a Muslim*)

Islam is a challenge we cannot ignore. It is Christianity's greatest competitor. Dr. Samuel Zwemer (1867-1952), American missionary to the Middle East, described it as "at once the most Christian and most anti-Christian of all the non-Christian religions." Yet, very few Christians understand the core teachings and the culture of Islam or know how to respond to it.

In Western democracies, many Muslims experience a freedom which they never had in their native countries. Muslim immigrants, guest-workers, and students extol the virtues of Islam, demand privileges for their faith, buy time on radio and television, and utilize other media to promote their religion. They sponsor discussions and debates, challenging and defeating Christian leaders who don't take the time to make a thorough study of Islam. And since the U.S. and its allies declared war against Islamist terrorism, many Muslims concerned with Islam's image vehemently declare that Islam means peace, and proclaims tolerance and freedom. And far too long secular media have presented a sanitized version of Islam. Columnist Michael Valpy, religion reporter for one of Canada's national dailies the *Globe and Mail*, approvingly quoted a university professor who declared that "Islam has been the most tolerant of religions." Authors in the West, who have written on the world of Islam, have also painted a rosy picture. For example, in 1945, an English woman, Frey Stark, wrote a book with the significant title *East is West* which she dedicated to her "brothers the young effendis (men of standing in the Middle East)." Stark considered Islam like any other religion which, while supplying its followers with spiritual reasons for living, must not hinder their economic activities, and which could be used as a bulwark against the ravages of atheistic communist ideology. But if these "young effendis" have so much oil money to spend since the OPEC price revolution, why then is the majority of the Arab population so desperately poor? Only a limited number of Muslim elites have benefited from the oil. They have bulging bank accounts, Mercedes Benzes and swimming pools. The Saudis claim the "gift of black gold," oil, as a double blessing vouchsafed by Allah on their behalf. But this blessing from Allah has not done much to improve living standards in most Arab nations. Why have Arab nations with all their oil wealth not caught up with the West? Shortly after the 1991 Gulf War, Edward W. Said, a former member of the Palestine National Council, commented, "We all do ask ourselves why haven't we done more of what other peoples have done - liberate ourselves, modernize, make a distinctive positive mark on the world. Where is excellence? How is it rewarded? There are first-rate novelists, poets, essayists, historians, yet all of them are not only unacknowledged legislators, they have been hounded into alienated opposition. For an author to write is to perforce to be careful, not to anger Syria or the Islamic authorities or a Gulf potentate or two."

## **Anti-Christian**

Of all the major non-Christian religions in the world, Islam is definitely the most anti-Christian. In Muslim writings, the war against Christianity is the very model and prototype of the jihad (holy war). Since its rise in the 7th century, Islam has made gains mostly at the expense of Christian countries. Contrary to all the claims of Islamic tolerance, wherever Islam gained a hold, Christian churches like those of North Africa and Asia Minor simply disappeared. And all the native cultures, which the Romans and the Germans had respected, were exterminated in areas conquered by Muslim Arabs. The Koran plainly states the reason for its collision course with Christianity and why it often culminated in war. "Fight against such of those who have been given the Scripture as believe not in Allah, not the Last Day, and forbid not that which Allah hath forbidden by His messenger and follow not the religion of truth, until they pay the tribute readily, being brought low"(Surah ix:29).

In our post-modern era, and in the aftermath of the September 11 attack, Americans and Canadians felt real pain and spiritual needs. In many churches special prayers services were well attended. But the well-intentioned "interfaith prayer-services" were also signs of the times.

Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus attended these services, praying together, it was said, "to the same God." But the Bible strictly forbids syncretistic worship, the mingling of non-Christian religions with the Christian faith. Allah is not the same as the God of the Bible. Both Islam and Christianity are monotheistic faiths. But Christians reject Allah. Muslims deny the Trinity in the name of the unity of God. They think that the Trinity is really three gods-the Father, Jesus the Son and Mary the Mother! To them the most heinous of sin is ascribing a partner to God, and worshiping the "creature," Jesus Christ, rather than the Creator. The Koran states: "They surely disbelieve who say: Lo! Allah is the third of three; where there is no God save the One God. If they desist not from so saying a painful doom will fall on those of them who disbelieve" (Surah v:73).

The spirit of Islam is contrary to that of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ in many aspects. In the Koran Jesus is portrayed reverently as the son of the Virgin Mary, sinless, a servant, an apostle and a prophet, the Messiah, the Word of God and the Spirit of God. But He is not the son of God. He neither died on the cross nor arose from the dead on "the third day." He is a human guide, not the Redeemer. In various texts the Koran denies the deity of Christ. "O People of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion nor utter aught concerning Allah save the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers, and say not 'Three'-Cease! (it is) better for you! - Allah is only One God. Far is it removed from His transcendent majesty that he should have a son. His is all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. And Allah is sufficient as Defender" (Surah iv: 171 cf. 5: 72,73).

## **Diversity in Islam**

Although the Arab world remains the heartland of Islam, a majority of Muslims live in Asia - the largest numbers in Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, and Central Asia. In Europe Islam grows yearly by 6.5 percent. Most European Muslims live in Russia. France has 5 million, German 3.5 million. In some European countries Islam has surpassed Protestant Christianity in numbers. Muslims began to arrive in the U.S. in the nineteenth century and established early communities in the Midwest- Detroit, Toledo and Chicago. The oldest mosque still in use dates from 1934 and is in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The largest number of mosques are found in New York State, followed by California, Illinois, and New Jersey. In the 1960s the Muslim community began to grow dramatically and is now approximately the same size as the Jewish community and is continuing to expand rapidly by immigration and proselytization.

Despite the impression most Westerners have of Islam as a unified faith, the Muslim world is no more a monolithic whole than the Christian world. There are growing differences between Muslims in every area of their life: socially, educationally and religiously. What may be true of the life of a modern Ph.D. from Cairo or Beirut is radically different from the isolated Arab in the Saudi desert.

The major division within formal Islam is between the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. The split was occasioned over who should lead the umma (Muslim community) after the death of Muhammad. The vast majority refer to themselves as Sunnis, who follow the sunnah (path) of Muhammad as recorded in the Hadith (collections of traditions of Muhammad and his followers). They follow the Arabian pattern for choosing a chief: the elders elected a caliph as a political leader. Any candidate who met the conditions of eligibility could be elected. The Sunnis greatly esteem the first four caliphs who, one after another, succeeded Muhammad as rulers over the umma. The Caliphs were bound to uphold the sharia (the law) and safeguard the umma.

## **Shiites**

The major split in Islam, originally political in nature, gradually assumed a more religious dimension. The Shi'ites form less than one fifth of the total Muslim population of the world. The Shi'ites tend to disparage the first three Sunni Caliphs. They would say that Ali, the fourth Sunni successor of Muhammad and his son-in-law and nephew, should have immediately become the ruler over all the Muslims. They regarded therefore Ali as the first true Caliph or Iman. He was not only to be a political leader like the Sunni Caliphs, but also a religious leader and a vehicle of divine guidance. They adopted the doctrine that the Iman is by divine appointment. After Ali's assassination, there arose from among the Shiites a succession of Imans who were considered their highest authorities. Some Shiites acknowledge seven Imans, whereas others recognize twelve. In the process of time, their ayatollahs began to view themselves as the medium of the last Iman, receiving direct instructions to implement Islamic law, thus fulfilling the will of Allah on earth. Shi'i is today the state religion of Iran. It is strong in Iraq. Many Shiites also reside in Pakistan, India, Yemen, Lebanon and other countries.

Along with the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the 1979 Revolution in Iran ranks as a significant milestone in the history of ideologies. The Bolsheviks dethroned God, the Iranian ayatollah Khomeini enthroned Allah. Since the revolution, Iran has pursued its own course in the world of Islam. The ideologies of the Islamic Republic of Iran devised a Western-style constitution that excludes non-Islamic modes of behavior. The triumph of Khomeini gave Islamist fundamentalism a powerful base. It appeared that the political and religious initiative throughout the Middle East, including the Arab world, was in the hands of the Islamist forces. The Iranian ayatollahs promoted an Islamist revolution abroad made possible only through reliance on a source of income that is generated by non-Islamic, capitalist needs: the export of oil. Bassam M. Madany observed that Khomeini's "coup galvanized the Shiite masses in Iran. One year later, it enabled them to withstand the Iraqi invasion, and to turn it into a jihad or holy war. Eventually the Iranian revolution was exported to Lebanon." In 1987 the Iranian government even issued a special stamp to commemorate the martyrs of Hizbullah (Party of Allah) in Lebanon.

The revolution brought a shock to the Christians in Iran. Many fled from the iron-fisted grip of the Islamist revolutionaries because they knew their stance on Christianity. (Throughout its history, Islam has made every effort to stamp out Christianity) Since 1979 five pastors have been martyred in Iran and countless others have been persecuted. Today, Iranian believers are routinely persecuted and often martyred. Pastor Mehdi Dibaj, one of those martyred for Christ, often said, "The Church in Iran is like a rose petal; the more you press it, the sweeter the perfume."

## **Anti-Israel**

When Dr. Richard John Neuhaus came out of his church in New York on September 11, the first commentary he heard was: "That's what we get for unconditionally supporting Israel." On U.S. television the same question was several times asked, "Why do they hate us so much?" And the answer in one word was "Israel." In his book *Understanding the Arab World*, the Christian Arab Louis Bahjat Hamada writes that he has been asked over and over again by his students and others, "Why do the Arabs hate us Americans?" Hamad answered them by simply saying that the Arabs do not hate Americans as a whole, "but the Arabs believe that the United States has lost its interest in playing a neutral peacemaker's role in the Middle East, and pledged to support Israel's inhumane political policies, at the expense of ignoring the Palestinians' human rights."

The birth of Israel in 1948 immediately followed by the first Arab-Israeli war, contributed to the revival of Islamist fundamentalism. What right, the Muslims asked, did the United Nations have to radically change the map and political status of their land? In response Jihad was declared.

In 1969 an Islamic Summit Conference, representing 24 Muslim states "and the Muslim community of India," resolved to strive for the liberation of Jerusalem. A political get together of forty foreign ministers of Muslim lands held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in July,

1975, called for the expulsion of Israel from the United Nations. Khomeini's political and religious aim was the conquering of Jerusalem. In 1991 Azzam Tamini, Jordan's director of the fundamentalist Brotherhood's parliamentary office, said, "It is no secret that we, as Muslims, look forward to eliminating the state of Israel."

## **Conclusion**

The war against terrorism has led to a greatly heightened awareness of the global threats posed by militant Islamists. But not all Muslims are Islamists. Many are active modernizers who seek to adapt their faith to the modern world. We must do our best to communicate the difference between Islam and Islamists, which is embraced by a minority of Muslims. Instead of reviling Muslims and their faith we should endeavor to understand them, study the history of Islam, its doctrines and practices. I suggest that churches offer courses on Islamics. For the sake of the spread of the Gospel among Muslims, even a minimum knowledge of Islam can greatly assist Christians in their outreach. Bassam M. Madany, who served many years as the radio minister for the Arabic Back to God Hour broadcast, warns that the study of Islamics may become very dangerous if one forgets his main task; the relevant proclamation of the gospel to the Muslims of today.

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