

Exploring Islam in the light of Scripture (2)

Filling the Void

Why do some Westerners convert to Islam? What makes this religion so appealing to them? Secularism has produced a spiritual vacuum. In our Western view of the world, the prevailing "norm" has become that of secular humanism. Such a norm declares that humans rule the world! People are free to decide their own destinies. In our secular society, values have become relative and consequently are not really open to question. This process of secularization with its godless and norm-less tendencies is the bitter fruit of our Western civilization, which has abandoned its Christian heritage. The challenge for Westerners is to reconsider why they have abandoned their Christian heritage - not only in the social sense, but also personally. In abandoning it we are now in a terrible mess - intellectually, morally and spiritually. But people cannot function in a spiritual vacuum. They search for something to fill the void. In our time, Islam with its holistic worldview seems so appealing for those who no longer see Christianity as a vital faith, which engages all of life. Islam does not divide the sacred from the secular. Ghulam Sarwar writes, "Islam is a complete way of life. It is the guidance provided by Allah, the Creator of the Universe, for all mankind. It covers all that people do in their lifetime. Islam tells the purpose of our creation, our final destiny and our place among other creatures. It shows us the best way to conduct our private, social, economic, moral and spiritual affairs of life."

From this perspective, the desire of Muslims to establish educational institutions in the West is understandable. For example, Muslims have their own university in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. On September 4, 2006, Evangelical/Reformed theologian, Dr. Ben Wentzel, attended the Islamic University of Rotterdam (IUR) for the opening exercises of the new academic year. The ceremony began with the reading of Sura 75 from the Koran. At the IUR a Muslim can study for iman, assistant-iman, Islamic theologian, Arabic teacher, interpreter etc. The IUR wants to build a bridge between the Islamic world and the west. But what struck Dr. Wentzel was the absence in the curriculum of a course in Bible knowledge and Christianity. He notes that Arabic dominates the curriculum too much. How can one build a bridge when there is no attempt to learn about the Dutch Christian heritage? Wentzel points out that the imans should also learn to read the Bible in Dutch as since the sixth century the Netherlands was greatly influenced by the Bible and Christianity. He also states that IUR faculty should ask for freedom for Christians to practice their faith in those countries where they are being persecuted.

Who is a Muslim?

Who is a Muslim? To be a Muslim is in the first place a social concept, a belonging to a religious-political community. It is not an expression of one's personal relationship with God. Westerners often think all Muslims are alike. This is of course not so. Islam is divided into various groupings, which do not recognize each other as orthodox. The main groupings are the Sunnis, Shiites, and the Sufis. The Sunnis form the main body

of Islam, which comprises about eighty percent of all Muslims. They believe that the true line of succession from Muhammad is found in the historic succession of the caliphs. The Shiites are the followers of Ali, the first cousin of Muhammad the husband of his daughter Fatima. The Shiites believe that Ali was the true successor to Muhammad in the leadership of the Islamic community. The Suffis form the mystical wing of Islam that renounces worldly attachments, inclines to theological speculation, cultivates outward discipline, sees God in all things, and strives for union of their beings with God's. The name Sufi comes from the early ascetics who wore garments of wool (suf). Some Suffis have virtually deified Muhammad, something considered anathema by orthodox Muslims.

Islam the final religion

Unlike Christianity, Islam names itself, but even then the word "Islam" appears only eight times in the whole Koran. Sura 5:3 announces to the Muslims the completion of their religion. "This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion." Islam is also viewed as the final religion. "And whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted of him, and in the hereafter he will be one of the losers" (Surah 3:85). This belief in Islam as the only true and final religion influences Muslims' relationship to non-Muslims and gives them the feeling of superiority over all other religions. But Christians may never assume an air of superiority over against other religions. We are always under the judgment of the cross.

Islam does not mean "peace." It means "submission." God wants everyone to live in willed submission to Him. "Submission" constitutes the essence of what Islam is about. It means to "surrender oneself" and molding one's entire life according to the patterns of Islam. It focuses strongly on the will of God declaring it and explaining it so humans may submit to it. Hence, Islam places a major emphasis on law. Formal acts of worship in private and public help set the tone. It is about making the whole of life an act of worship and obedience. That's why the sharia (the law) is so important in Islam. It gives direction to obedience. Islam has always been a legalistic faith. It is a religion that suits "natural man."

The sacred and the secular

Dr. Wentzel notes that faith in Allah and science is not separated. He comments that the West can learn from Islam. Don't faith, science, and culture belong together? Islam challenges Christians to take their faith seriously. We need to teach our youth the Scripture and get them acquainted with the creeds and the confessions. They must be given a sense of excitement for the Scriptures as a guide for their daily lives. And Wentzel warns that if we continue to doubt or neglect the content of our faith, Islam will win.

Far too long, many Western Christians have privatized their faith. The Gospel is more than a pathway to heaven. It embraces all of life. In Scripture there is no duality

between the sacred and the profane, between the public square and private faith. The Christian faith involves the will, the mind, and the emotions. We believe with our whole being. In Christ we have become "a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15). There is no human condition that is not touched by the Gospel - marriage, child rearing, relationship to the government, business etc. There is no single neutral area in our life; nothing in life falls outside the power of sin and nothing is excluded from God's redemption. As Prof. Dr. J. H. Bavinck stated, "Christ wants to be Lord of the whole of life...It is impossible to make someone a partial disciple of Jesus Christ. If one is to be a disciple, he has to become a disciple wholly, he must follow Christ in his personal life as well as in his social, economic, and political relationships."

(To be continued)
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