

# Understanding the World of Islam

**American Christians feel that they are learning about Muslim nations when they read about oil politics, ruthless dictatorships and wars with Israel. Sadly missing is an appreciation for a rich religious tradition**

Much Western attention has recently been focused on the Middle East, and not always for the happiest reasons or from the loftiest motives. Although the Middle East is by no means the whole of the Islamic realm, our growing concern with that part of the world that was the birthplace of Islam invites us to take more seriously a religious tradition that now extends far beyond the region of its origin. Few matters of international importance call more urgently upon American Christians to give immediate and open-minded consideration to the religious and cultural depths that lie beneath the economic and political surfaces.

There are three aspects critical to the Western understanding of the expanding world of Islam: 1) Islam as a faith tradition in relation to the Judeo-Christian traditions; 2) the burgeoning Muslim presence in the West, especially in the United States; and 3) our need to be reeducated about the faith and peoples of Islam.

## Islam as an Abrahamic Faith

Central to Islamic faith is the doctrine of the oneness of God and its immediate corollary, the equality of humanity under God. In its very early days, the Muslim community's growth in Arabia had a sort of countercultural quality, in that it sought to instill in its members a unity that could transcend tribal factionalism. In our time, too, Islam teaches the value of a unity beyond that of nationalism or religious exclusivism. (That is not to say that Islam is not, like every vigorous faith tradition, clearly distinguishable as to its membership.) Belief in the unity of God is both an intensely personal faith and one which aims at forging community.

"Islam" is often rendered in English as "submission," usually bearing the conno-

tation of passivity and even mute resignation. Islam does indeed mean an acknowledgment of one's total dependence on God and unquestioning commitment to Him; but its active aspect is equally significant. Involving both faith and works, Islam is perhaps best translated as "grateful response." It is a response that can be made only after one has confessed God as sovereign and peerless. Faith is inextricably bound up with active attention to social responsibility, the public profession of faith and the fostering of community of worship.

Westerners have often stereotyped Muslims as bowing listlessly under the burden of predestination and of God's all-stifling will. From that stereotype follows the conclusion that third world Muslims must surely view any proposed attempt to better their lot in life as sheer folly. Such an assessment is analogous to saying that since predestination has been preached among Christians at various times by various influential teachers, all Christians must be convinced that their eternal fate is sealed and that human initiative is futile. From the Qur'an on, Islam has taught a balanced conviction of both divine Lordship and human freedom and responsibility.

Numerous texts from the Qur'an stress the relationship of Islam to the other Abrahamic faiths. For example: "Proclaim: We believe in God and that which was revealed to us, and that which was revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes and that which was given to Moses and Jesus and to the prophets from their Lord; and we make no distinction between any of them."

I do not mean to gloss over the significant theological differences that divide Jews, Christians and Muslims as though they could, or even should, be ignored or cleared away. Nevertheless, points of dis-

agreement between Christian and Muslim are in many ways analogous to those that separate Christian from Christian. Beneath the expressed theological differences there are too often much deeper issues of suspicion and mistrust. In an attempt to confront those more difficult issues, the National Council of Churches established two years ago a Task Force on Christian-Muslim Relations. The task force's principal concerns are reconciliation, recognition of religious pluralism, the education of Christians to take seriously the role of Islam with respect to social justice and peace and the fostering of relationships among individual Christians and Muslims as well as among Christian and Muslim organizations and institutions in the United States.

## Islam in the United States

Islam is rapidly becoming a more prominent feature of the American religious landscape. This is especially true since the organization formerly known as the Black Muslims began to integrate itself actively into the wider community of "orthodox" Islam, and has taken the title of "World Community of Islam in the West." Muslims in the United States now number approximately 2 million. As that number increases, both Muslim and non-Muslim Americans will need to look more and more to the experience of countries such as England, Canada and France for ways of understanding the difficulties and successes of Muslims in the West.

Muslim membership in America has derived chiefly from two sources: converts and immigrants. American converts to Islam seem to come largely from the 20-to-30-year age group. They are men and women, blacks and whites, students and people from a variety of income brackets.



Several themes are prominent among the reasons I have heard students give for their conversion. They respond to Islam's positive stand on social justice and racial equality—the latter representing a turn-about from the “black supremacy” espoused by the Black Muslims in the early years under Elijah Muhammad, before Malcolm X's dramatic account of his experience of human equality on pilgrimage in Mecca. Converts speak of appreciating Islam's moral challenge to “command the good and forbid the evil.” Emphasis on family cohesiveness, sense of belonging to a larger community and the repudiation of exploitation of one's fellows also figure significantly in conversions. Finally, but not least, these students have been attracted by Islam's insistence that “to God belong the heavens and the earth,” and that everything in creation is sign of God's presence. Respect for this earthly theater of the divine, as taught in the Qur'an, provides a powerful impulse to their faith.

Muslims from other lands, whether they be immigrants who intend to take up permanent residence in the United States or students who plan eventually to return home, are arriving here in increasing numbers. Students are mostly interested in scientific/technological training and are sometimes funded by their national governments. Immigrants to whom I have spoken have indicated frankly that they came here to improve their economic lot, but they still desire to live as Muslims in a non-Islamic society.

non-Muslim) that many Christians have felt for centuries. In addition, if a Muslim mother and father wish to pass along Islamic tradition to their children, they must seek out resources for a specifically Muslim religious education, either by helping to develop private institutions or by securing “equal time” in other institutions in which religious instruction is compulsory.

There is also the strongly felt need to pass their faith along to non-Muslims. Since Muslims consider their religion to be universally encompassing, they want it to be known and shared as such. That this is a delicate matter is quite evident to many Muslims, especially to those who have experienced zealous proselytizing by Christians. Finally, and perhaps most upsetting of all, Muslims encounter what they perceive to be a serious moral rift, a split between secular/civil morality and religious/traditional morality, between what the courts allow and what faith in God demands. They frequently attribute the tension to the American separation of church and state.

Several important Islamic organizations have arisen in this country, especially in the past 15 years or so, for the purpose of aiding American Muslims to continue the practice of their faith in their non-Muslim surroundings. Among the various groups are: the Council of Imams, whose task is to train local mosque prayer leaders, or “imams”; the Federation of Islamic Associations; the Islamic Medical Association; the Association of Muslim

tablishing of Islamic institutions, including places of worship, community service centers and educational facilities; 3) assisting Muslims in the practical aspects of religious observance by informing them as to the particulars of Friday congregational prayer, the giving of alms for the needy, the pilgrimage to Mecca and rites of marriage and funeral; 4) facilitating Islam's faith-sharing effort among non-Muslims; finally 5) encouraging the “unity of Muslim conscience” through a heightened sense of belonging and Muslim identity.

#### American Attitudes Toward the Muslim World

“And where are we in our ability to understand and respond to all this?” asked Meg Greenfield in a Newsweek article entitled “Islam and Us.” “Intellectually and emotionally,” she continued, “we are about where Columbus was when he saw the natives and assumed they were ‘Indians’—except that we are sailing in the other direction.” She was referring specifically to Western reactions to the most recent developments in Iran, but her remarks are not out of place in the present context.

As events elsewhere in the Muslim world become more widely publicized and their effects more widely felt, public opinion in this country cannot fail to be influenced in various directions. Negative attitudes are already quite common, especially in response to the Iranian crisis and the increasing cost of gasoline. Still more evident negativism may well be expected as Muslim presence in the United States becomes more prominent, so immediate is the association in many people's minds between “Muslim” and “the Middle East” and “oil.” Reactions to circumstances both abroad and here even now range from paranoia to welcoming acceptance, from blind rage to a firm determination to understand. Summarizing his new book, *Orientalism*, in an article for Time, Prof. Edward Said of Columbia University wrote:

“We need understanding to note that repression is not principally Islamic or Oriental but a reprehensible aspect of the human phenomenon. ‘Islam’ cannot explain everything in Africa and Asia, just as ‘Christianity’ cannot explain Chile or South Africa. . . . Will it not ease our fear to accept the fact that people do the same

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Both the students and the resident immigrants face a number of serious difficulties if they wish to remain active religiously and alive spiritually. Muslims who want to be “observant” find that extra effort is involved in living according to two distinct calendars—the Muslim lunar calendar with Friday as the day of prayer; and our solar calendar pivoting around Sunday. They experience the same qualms about “mixed marriages” (Muslim to

Scientists and Engineers; and the Association of Muslim Social Scientists. One of the most widespread is the Muslim Students Association. Its 200 chapters represent some 60 nationalities. A recent brochure sent out by the association's headquarters in Plainfield, Ind., describes the group's five top priority concerns as follows: 1) the dissemination of knowledge of Islam through publications geared both to Muslims and non-Muslims; 2) the es-



things inside as well as outside Islam, that Muslims live in history and in our common world, not simply in the Islamic context?"

Whatever the particular issue under discussion, our most pressing need is to affirm our common bond of humanity with those both here and elsewhere who call themselves Muslims.

Economic pressures are forcing Americans to take fresh stock of the United States' role in world politics. That consideration must in turn give us cause to reassess our international and intercultural relationships in terms of values. I believe the currently developing situations present us with two large options. We can, on the one hand, allow prevalent stereotypes and prejudices to be confirmed and reinforced by the alarming shift in economic influences and third world muscle flexing. We may hear a lot of such things as, "I've always said they were ungrateful," spoken about not only oil-exporting Muslims but of all developing entities that may be regarded as alien and potentially hostile. One hardly needs hypersensitive hearing to discern such attitudes, even on the part of people who are seriously working to arrive at some sort of "objective" understanding.

Should we choose the first option, two dangers impend. The first is that of personal and political isolationism. To the oil producers and the developing nations, it says: "We don't need you any more, anyway." To those who are perceived as alien intruders at home, it says: "Why don't you go back where you came from?" The second danger is that of attempting to perpetuate a role in interpersonal relationships and in world politics that is no longer viable, let alone human, let still more alone truly Christian or Islamic. This is the role of active prejudice in the name of personal security and of intervention politics in the name of national security.

On the other hand, we can choose to foster growing acceptance of Muslims as people. It is a risky option. It may seem even to imply a kind of religious relativism for Christians, a tacit approval of another faith as "true." In any case, it means meeting Muslims on their own ground without being afraid that we have capitulated or that we will be swallowed up by an encroaching tide.

Before one can seriously consider the second option, one must look again at the

telltale signs of stereotype and prejudice, learn to identify their more subtle varieties and begin to act against them. Negative attitudes toward Muslims of any nationality often manifest certain features common to all caricatures and stereotypes. For example, they are very difficult to "reason" with. Often enough, they are rooted in centuries of misinformation, distorted or onesided reporting of history, or out-and-out defamation. Prejudices seem usually to be based on fear of the

contradictions and ambiguities with which modern technological society confronts a strongly tradition-oriented religious faith. Understanding means, in addition, that we who have "grown up" with technology must acknowledge that we, too, often find ourselves groping for our Christian moorings in a flood of scientific progress. Perhaps the question of our relationship to tradition is slightly less vexing for us only because many of us have never known tradition as have the

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little-known and on the concomitant need to control by belittling and pigeonholing.

Some of the more commonly heard Western stereotypes of Muslims are, for example: Islam has always been spread by the sword alone, whereas Christianity has never been known thus to bloodstain the standard of the faith. Islam has always and everywhere been intolerant of other faiths and wantonly destructive of culture. All Muslims are either Arab or black Americans. All Arabs are fanatical and untrustworthy, in the best tradition of Ali Baba and the 40 thieves. Polygamy is rampant in Islam, and the Muslim notion of heaven is blatantly and utterly sensual and without admixture of spiritual fulfillment. All political upheavals in the Islamic world are purely the result of religious fanaticism and factionalism. Of course, not all Muslims are innocent of anti-Western and anti-Christian bias. Some are, no doubt, convinced that all Americans are hopelessly materialistic and amoral. My point here is merely that we must first examine our own consciences as to how we may be guilty of initiating or nurturing a climate of mistrust.

Granted that we American Christians must admit to a significant attitudinal problem in relation to Islam and Muslims, how might the stereotypes and prejudices be overcome? Genuine understanding of the Muslim world in the 20th century, from the United States to Indonesia, necessarily involves an appreciation of the

children of truly ancient societies. In any case, we need most of all to come to terms with the centrality of the traditional in Islam if we are to meet Muslims as people.

Three areas may be spotlighted as emblematic of the divergent points of view in question. First of all, among tradition-minded Muslims, the family is often a much tighter-knit unit than it is in what Muslims frequently regard as a fragmented, independence-minded American society. There is a marked difference in perceptions of societal and familial relationships. Muslims have remarked to me that they miss the overall feeling of social "closeness" they grew up with in a more traditional society. They have long cherished the art of conversation and the kind of lavish hospitality and gift giving that strike the non-Muslim Westerner as almost compulsive.

Muslims have no little difficulty in dealing with the American separation of the civil and religious spheres. The bifurcation sets up a tension for them that escapes American observers. For a Muslim, life must be seen as a totality under the sovereignty of God alone. The ideal state is none other than a theocracy. From that perspective, religious authority in the United States appears to collapse in conflict with civil authority. The theory is, of course, not an Islamic invention.

As suggested earlier, however, easily the most problematical of the three areas is the crossing of the technology gap. For



most Americans the experience has been more like traveling through a continuum than crossing a gap, and it has been largely taken for granted. Muslims are quite sensitive to what they perceive to be a disparity between a world divinely infused with value and one that is given value purely by virtue of human striving. Westernization often seems to them synonymous with secularization. Perhaps, some have suggested, the process of secularization has been less objectionable to Western Christians only because it has been more gradual. When traditional Muslims find their societies leaping suddenly across the technology gap, "Westernizing secularism" seems all the more starkly apparent in their midst.

What appears to Westerners as totally reactionary in the Islamic world abroad is chiefly the result of the awesome difference between experiences of the two sides of the technology gap. In fact, traditional Muslim societies are in many cases seeking to steer a course between the Scylla of scientific progress and the Charybdis of secularism. The evident ease with which monied Muslims come to the West and are suddenly transformed into technologized consumers is deceptive. Such a transition

is seldom as smooth as it appears, and no amount of sophistication can prevent it from being fraught with ambiguity and potential confusion. This is hardly surprising: We Americans are far from realizing the full impact of scientific progress and consumerism on Christianity and farther still from an integration of the two; yet our entire history as a nation is virtually coextensive with the age of industrial and scientific revolutions. Is the 20th-century reticence of much of the Muslim world merely to be attributed to backwardness and a stubborn refusal to confront the "brute facts"?

I suggest, in conclusion, that we will be better able to meet Muslims as human beings when we admit that our own society is not inherently fortified against spiritual entropy; when we admit that Muslims are not alone in suffering the ravages of fanaticism and factionalism; when we admit that we are engaged in a shared search for enduring values. Mutual understanding can occur only when we have begun to cultivate trust and respect. We Americans must also come to see ourselves precisely as Westerners whose perspective has been narrowed by a century or more of expanding prosperity and international power.

May we meet all people from other cultures and religious traditions with such freedom and self-knowledge that we need neither be frantic in hoping to convert them to our way of thinking, nor fearful that we will lose our identity in theirs. In his essay, "Chaos or Community," Martin Luther King Jr. has characterized our situation beautifully:

"Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies. This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all men. This often misunderstood and misinterpreted concept has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of mankind."

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