

What is Islam?

Facing the Claims of a Successful Religion

“Islam is an Arabic word which means peace, purity, acceptance and commitment. The religion of Islam is the complete acceptance of the teachings and guidance of God, i.e. surrender to the Will of God”. With these words from the pamphlet *Islam at a Glance* published by the Islamic Dawah Movement of South Africa we are invited to look at Islam at its best.

Islam is a religion, a social, political and ideological system, a world power and spiritual stronghold, a culture and society, all in one. Unless we understand it as an all-embracing entity we will not be in a position to fully realize its enormous impact.

Various elements have contributed to the formation and practical outworking of this system, namely:

- The Man: Muhammad
 - The Books: Qur’an and Hadith
 - The Practices: The five Pillars and the many legal regulations (shariah)
 - The Belief and Teaching: The Articles of Faith and many other details
 - The Feasts: a few major and many minor ones
 - The Sects: with a great abundance among the *shi’ites*
- (We will not be able to cover this vast ground in the short space of one session.)

Part 1:

Let us briefly reflect on some of these points:

1. The life of the Prophet of Islam spells “success”:

From a destitute beginning as an orphan boy to the powerful ruler of the Arabian peninsula. From a persecuted religious dreamer and lonely preacher (in Mecca) to a greatly respected and feared leader among his followers and foes (after the Hijra).

From illiteracy (so Muslims claim) to prophethood, actually “leaving” a book for his followers.

From sorrow and despair (620-death of Uncle Abu Talib and wife Chadidsha) to a hitherto unknown position of popularity, power and greatness.

What a life! No wonder people adored him as described in the Sirat by one of his “fans”:

“He was neither too tall or too short, but of average stature. His hair was not too curly or wavy. His face was neither too full nor too fleshy. He was ruddy in complexion. His eyes were black, his eyelashes long. He had a strong head and solid shoulders, a slightly and finely hairy chest, large hands and feet. When he walked he did not step firmly, as if walking up a steep path. When he turned, he did so fully. He walked as lightly as if walking on water. When he looked to the side he turned himself around. Between his shoulders was the seal of prophethood. His hands were the most generous of anyone’s, his breast the most courageous, his tongue the most truthful. He was the most loyal to his charges, tender and pleasant in his dealings. Whoever saw him was filled with awe. Those who were close to him loved him. When others described him they would say, “I have never met anyone like him.”¹

The full picture, however, is somewhat different: As attractive as Muhammad’s outward beauty may have appeared to his followers, others saw the ‘glance of death’ in his eyes², his courageous breast meant assassination of at least 47 of his personal enemies under the most deceitful circumstances, legalizing lies during war, in agreements with enemies and between

¹ *The Life of Muhammad* by Ibn Hisham, Villach: Light of Life, 164-165.

² *Islam* by Gerhard Nehls and Walter Eric, LCA, 22.

husband and wife. He had no scruples to marry well over a dozen wives, some of them widows because he had arranged for their husbands to be killed (between 600-800 Jews), another one was the former wife of his adopted son, and the only virgin he received into his *harem* was the nine year old daughter of his friend Abu Bakr. She was just eighteen when she became a widow left behind with no chance to ever get married again.

Muslim writers are masters in blending out these and may other dark spots in the life of their hero. The Pakistani scholar Mawdudi is a classic example for this attitude.³

2. **The Qur'an has been described by Muslims as "the ultimate miracle".** (A. Deedat⁴)

By its own claim the eyes of unbelievers are soon filled with tears enthralled by its literary beauty upon listening to the recitation of a sura.

I would strongly recommend every messenger among Muslims to read the Qur'an for himself and compare it with the Bible. It is so tempting to assume that the Holy Book of the Muslims is more or less the same as our Bible, or at least the Old Testament and thus each adherent should follow his guide book. But the truth is that the two Books are worlds apart and no assurance, no covenant, no logical development of thought can be found in the Qur'an. Muslim writers, of course, would label such statements as "ignorance and malice". As M.A. Quraishy puts it in his Syllabus textbook for I.R.E. in Kenya:

*"Non-Muslim scholars cannot be expected to be complimentary towards the Holy Qur'an... most of the commentators in the West belong to the Christian faith and they cannot escape the fact that they have tried to sling mud at every opportunity on Islam..."*⁵

But Quraishy fails to give a convincing explanation for the strange arrangement of the book and does not even mention the baffling principle of abrogation in the Qur'an which makes it very convenient to quote completely contradicting positions to suit every given situation. – We know this as "situation ethics".

3. **The teaching of Islam is another fascinating area of comparison and contrast to the Bible.** We could here consider the five Articles of Faith or compare the sub-topics of death, judgment, heaven and hell, salvation or grace in Islamic teaching.

Let me just touch the area of predestination and salvation in Islam which are closely interwoven with each other. (see *Islam*, 111-130) We could ask our Muslim friend: "Why should God be pleased to leave his creatures in utter uncertainty and fear about their future destiny?" – "How can anyone be expected to submit to a god who is described as relating in an utterly arbitrary and unpredictable manner with his subjects? Is it reasonable to ever trust such a god?"

4. **One of the most non-confrontational entry points are the feasts in Islam.** There are the great feasts of Eid-ul-Adha (slaughtering of an animal) and Eid-ul-Fitr (joyful completion of the fasting period of Ramadaan). It's not difficult at all to get alongside Muslims during these joyful occasions and create excellent openings for a gospel presentation. In some places *Maulid*, the birthday of Muhammad, has assumed an even superior place.

Other natural points of contact and Christian care for our Muslim neighbours are weddings and funerals. During these times of shared joy or pain Muslims may be very open to the message of love and hope as we have received it in the pages of the Bible.

5. **Lastly a word to the multitude of sects in Islam.** Although the awareness of the great multiplicity of religious groupings in Islam should not deceive us into a wicked joy of

³ *Towards Understanding Islam* by A.Mawdudi, Nairobi: The Islamic Foundation, 51-55.

⁴ *Al Qur'an, the Miracle of Miracles* by A. Deedat, Durban: IPCI, 1991.

⁵ *Textbook of Islam, book 1* by M.A. Quraishy, Nairobi: The Islamic Foundation, 237.

triumph, it is helpful to know that Islam does not tower as one unified, strong fortress. The competition between Shiites and Sunnis, between Iran and Saudi-Arabia, the exclusiveness of sub-groups such as the Ishmaelis, Bohoras (=the best) or the solo-run of the Ahmadiyyas, Bahai and other groups are a reality. And right across all these sects run some distinct currents such as the highly emotional displays of piety found in Islamic Sufism (=mysticism), the all-dominating brotherhoods or the revivalist cum radically fanatical warner and fighter of the Tabligh movement.

We will want to know more about their peculiar religious and social stand and seek to find the key to their heart in a “redemptive analogy” or some historical key-even which may open the door for the gospel message.

Part 2:

We noticed that the Qur’an leaves Muslims in no doubt about their superior status above the followers of all other religions:

“You are the best of peoples, evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in God. If only the People of the Book had faith, it were best for them: among them are some who have faith, but most of them are perverted transgressors.”
Sura 3:110

And the Islamic propaganda machinery would amplify this with slogans like these:

1. Islam helps people in need.
2. Islam is non-racial and does not differentiate between rich and poor.
3. Islam is the religion of the non-white people.
4. Islam is a simple and rational religion.
5. Islam does not expect drastic changes in life style and culture.
6. Islam is not abstract, but very practical.
7. Islam shows the way to total freedom.
8. Islam is taking over this world. Don’t stay on the losers’ side.
9. Islam is a religion of power (including magic power) and success.
10. Islam is the shortest and broadest road that leads to God.

For the spiritually dead person these offers hold a lot of appeal, even though Muslims in many cases may not be in a position to “deliver the goods”. Nevertheless it leaves us with an enormous challenge to respond to these offers and more so to demonstrate and communicate the heart of the gospel to an aching world, including the Muslims.

But in today’s world Islam defines itself increasingly in contrast to Christianity as it is perceived from a Western image. As Muhammad Ata ar Rahim in his book “*Jesus – A Prophet of Islam*” concludes:

*“The Christianity of today is inseparable from the culture of the West. The Christian Church and the State are one. And the individuals who work within these institutions do not live as Jesus lived.”*⁶

And he leaves us in no doubt what he means:

*“The breakdown of the family structure in the West demonstrates the lack on an effective guide of behavior within a Christian marriage...because it is not known how Jesus acted... There is no record of how Jesus walked, how he sat, how he stood, how he kept himself clean, how he went to sleep, how he woke up, how he greeted people, how he was with old people... how he traveled, what he was allowed to do and what he was not allowed to do.”*⁷

⁶ *Jesus – A Prophet of Islam* by Muhammad Ata ar-Rahim, London: MWH, 1977, 205.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 200-201.

And he suggests:

“The doctrines on which Christianity today is based are not to be found within these records. ... The Church was not instituted by Jesus. He did not establish a hierarchy of priests to act as mediators between God and man. Yet the established Pauline church, from very early on, always taught Christians to believe that their salvation was assured if they acted and believed as the Church told them. From where did the Church derive its authority?”

This comment shows a typical projection of an Islamic ideal into the Christian faith. Because Muslims ought to follow the example of Muhammad in every detail (the *Sunnah* principle), the Christian ought to do just the same. As in so many other instances Islam has a completely external, carnal view of things, so much alike to the typical attitude of the Pharisees found in the NT. Clean hands are valued beyond pure hearts. Circumcision of the body is mandatory to become a Muslim, but not a change of life-style. “The Spirit of Ramadaan” gladly allows for laziness, greed, fatalistic lethargy and fanatical over exertion. Islam has the power to change the history of nations, but “is powerless in changing the sexual behaviour of men” towards women, as one Muslim leader in Niger freely admitted to one of our SIM AIDS consultants.

Conclusion:

What should we do with Islam? How should we assess it? Some argue for an attitude of respect and understanding. Others go a step further and suggest that one cannot love Muslim people if one hates the religious system. If you hate Islam you will also hit back against Muslims; Nigeria could be quoted as a classical example in Africa. Yet others would radically denounce it as an anti-Christian, diabolic system which we should completely reject and abhor. In some countries Christians, and even the Evangelical Fellowship, have officially championed an Anti-Halaal campaign to steer themselves clear from such “food sacrificed to an idol or desert spirit”, as they would call it.

Apart from factual and theological considerations two strong convictions should guide us in our handling of the issue: we dare not put up our own stumbling blocks obstructing Muslim seekers from meeting the risen Christ, but rather take them by the hand and bring them closer to see Jesus for who he truly is. But neither dare we level out all differences between Islam and the Christian faith and confuse our brothers and sisters in Christ into the deception of perceiving Islam as a another way to God. Anyone who had received the Spirit of Christ ought to judge Islam through the Spirit of God from a stable, biblical platform.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Can you provide examples for some of the points given as an Islamic appeal from your own experience or context?

Evaluate each reason given whether it holds true to its appeal.

2. How is the identity and self-worth of Muslims affected by these appeals to a greater or lesser degree? And how do you connect this identity with Sura 3:110?

3. What is your opinion: Can a Christian both love Muslims and hate Islam? Or would you rather argue that the two are exclusive?

4. The struggle between Islam and the Christian faith has been termed “a battle of the books”. To what extent would you ascribe to this statement?

5. A troubled Christian asks you “Who is this Allah in Islam?” How will you answer and help him to some peace of mind?