

ISLAM – A BEGINNERS INTRODUCTION

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Why am I spending the next two Sunday evenings trying to understand Islam? Firstly because Islam in the future is going to be part of our lives and our children's lives. One of the most startling changes in recent years has been the revival of Islam as a European religion. Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigration into Britain. Turkish immigration into Germany. North African immigration into France. As a result there are large Islamic communities all across Europe. There are 5 million Muslims in France (8%) 3.5 million Muslims in Germany (4.3%) and 1.6 million Muslims in the UK that is 2.7%. In total there are something like 23 million Muslims in Europe. This population is going to increase because Muslim population is younger. In Denmark Muslim population is 200,000 which is 3.7% of the total. But a quarter of the births in Copenhagen are now Moslem. Projections are always doubtful. But in 20 years the Moslem population might be expected to more or less double to about 40 million. Firstly we ought to know about Islam because Islam is going to be part of our lives. Most times you go down Sutton High Street you will see a woman wearing the Hajib.

Secondly it's vital for the peace of the world. Internationally there is a conflict between the west and some elements in Islam – Al Qaeda, the Taliban and the rest. There's also Jewish-Islam conflict in Palestine and Christian- Moslem conflict in Nigeria. In this context it's imperative that Christianity, Judaism and Islam, build bridges between each other. Hans Kung put it better than anyone else. "No peace in the world without peace between the religions, no peace without dialogue".

When I say beginners guide to Islam I mean that. At theological college I don't think I remember a single minute trying to understand Islam. That was only if you were going to be a missionary. What I knew about Islam when I left college could have been more or less put on a postage stamp. Only in the last couple of years have I been trying to remedy this deficiency. So this is a beginner's guide.

First some obvious things. Firstly there are all sorts of different kinds of Islam just as differently kinds of Christianity. So just as you have Protestant and Catholic the big difference in Islam is between Sunni and Shia. The division between Shi'a and Sunni dates back to the death of the Prophet Muhammad, and the question of who was to take over the leadership of the Muslim nation. The Moslems elected Prophet Muhammad's close friend and advisor, Abu Bakr, as the first Caliph of the Islamic nation. Shi'a felt leadership should have gone to a member of the family or to an Imam appointed by God Himself. They felt it should have gone to his son in law Ali. The word Shi'a is short for "Shi'a-t-Ali," or "the Party of Ali."

In practice Shi'a and Sunni mostly believe the same. But the Shia Muslims believe that the Imam is sinless by nature, and that his authority is infallible as it comes directly from God. Therefore, Shia Muslims often venerate the Imams as saints and perform pilgrimages to their tombs and shrines in the hopes of divine intercession. If you find an Ayatollah this is always a Shi'a cleric. The word means "Sign of God" and those who carry the title are experts in Islamic studies.

Roughly 85% of Moslems are Sunni.

Then within there are differences within the groups – like conservatives or liberals. So for example within the Sunnis there are the Sufis, who on the whole incline to tolerance, or Wahhabism which is a reform movement of a very conservative kind which centres in Saudi Arabia. The Deobandi is a Sunni Islamic revivalist movement which started in India and has more recently spread to other countries, such as Afghanistan a very strong emphasis on Shari'ah law. They influenced the Taliban. About 600 of Britain's 1400 mosques are led by Deobandi influenced clerics.

Then just as with Christianity there are groups on the edge. The nearest mosque to us here is at Morden. Seats 10,000. Largest mosque in western Europe when built. Now this is an Ahmadiyya mosque. They believe that another prophet came after Mohamed in India. They believe the grave of Jesus is in Kashmir. As such most Moslems would not just say they were heretics. They would deny they were Moslems at all.

Earlier in the year I spoke at a 6th form event at Overton Grange with among others the Iman of the Morden Mosque. They had asked him to represent Islam. It's a good job there were no conservative Moslems because they would have been outraged. Asking an Iman from the Morden Mosque would be the equivalent of asking a Jehovah's Witness to speak for Christianity.

These distinctions are important but one word of caution. If you asked a lot of people in a Methodist Church how they differed from Anglicans how clearly would they be able to tell you. Some might say well we've just Christians. Probably a bit like that too with Islam.

Now let's go to the origins. Islam begins with the prophet Mohammed. He was born around 570 AD and he comes to believe there is one God and calls upon everyone to submit to that one God. The word Islam simply means those who submit to God. He came from Mecca and this becomes the centre of the Moslem movement.

I had a wonderful moment on holiday in Morocco. We were looking at the mosque in Marrakech and there was a wooden pointer on the top. That said the guide is so everyone one knows which direction Mecca is in. One of the ladies in the group "O do you mean Mecca is a real place. I never realised that". Yes Mecca is a real place in Saudi Arabia. From there Islam spread mainly by military conquest. Within a generation most of the Middle east was conquered by Moslem armies.

By his death the core of Islamic religion was also given. He had a series of revelations and the teaching was recoded in the Koran which is the Moslem equivalent to the Bible. The heart of Islam is the simple message God is one.

When you hear the call to prayer from the minaret. It says

God is the most great
I bear witness that there is no God but Allah
I bear witness that Mohammed is the prophet of Allah
Come to prayer
Come to salvation
God is the most great
There is no God but Allah

Practically this is expressed in daily living through what are known as the 5 pillars of Islam. These are the 5 duties which every Moslem must undertake.

Firstly you must bear witness to the faith. "I believe there is no god but Allah, and I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. Those are the first words you say as a Moslem and your dying words as well. Secondly pray 5 times a day. Thirdly charitable giving. 4th Fasting month of Ramadan. 5thly the pilgrimage. Every Moslem is supposed to go to Mecca once in their lifetime.

If you are Shia 3 other things are essential. First is jihad, which is also important to the Sunni, but not considered a pillar. The second is live a virtuous life and to encourage others to do the same. The third the "Exhortation to Desist from Evil". There is also a body of Islamic law called Shariah which is based on the traditional sayings of Mohammed.

I think that what you have therefore in most occasions is what we would recognise as the outlines of a basic simple good life with God. There is also a strong sense of belonging. The Moslem feels he belongs to the *Ummah*- the family. In that family they would say everyone is equal.

Well I say everyone. It is possible that women aren't. The Koran says "Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other. Good women are obedient". If women get out of hand they are to be beaten. "As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them. Then if they obey you, take no further action against them". What is more the Koran allows polygamy and concubinage. At the same time within this framework there is a good deal of provision for women. For example there is compulsory financial provision for widows. And the majority of converts to Islam in the Britain are women.

I have no hesitation in saying that Islam is a real way into God. But let me three critical points of concern.

First there is a scholarship deficit in Islam. In the Early centuries Islam preserved much of the heritage of Greece and Rome and intellectually was ahead of Western Europe. But around the 16th Century Islamic scholarship froze. Islam missed out on the Enlightenment and did not learn to critical scholarship to its faith. Today much of Islam is what we would call fundamentalist.

Secondly Islam has a problem with violence. So of course does Christianity. Christian history is stained by violence. Ireland, Bosnia, the inquisition, the crusades, Scottish covenanters riding into battle shouting "Jesus and no quarter". There is violence within the Scriptures. Moses and Joshua conquer Palestine by force. They saw God as a war God and at times they see God calling for the extermination of their enemies. But at least about Jesus we can say there is no violence there. Christianity spreads through the Roman Empire by the preaching of the word.

With Islam Mohammed is a warrior and violence is from the first part of the way Islam spreads. In 627 the Prophet authorized the massacre of Jewish men he accused of treating with the enemy. Despite pleas for mercy some six hundred to nine hundred men were beheaded in the marketplace. Their bodies were thrown into large open trenches, their women and children taken into slavery, their property distributed among the Muslims. In his final

address Mohammad says “I was ordered to fight all men until they say there is no God but Allah”.

Which brings me to Jihad. We are often told that jihad means inner struggle. It can mean that. The word jihad literally means *effort*. But from the first it can actually mean warfare and it is often has. War against unbelievers is a prominent theme in the Koran. Those who die in war are more blessed than those who die in peace. So “When the sacred months are over slay the idolaters wherever you find them. Arrest them, besiege them and lie in ambush everywhere for them. If they repent and take to prayer and pay the alms-tax, let them go on their way. Allah is forgiving and merciful”. Of course you can find equally violent passages in the Old Testament. But when Osama bin Laden says “I was ordered to fight the people until they say there is no God but Allah and his prophet Mohammed” that is almost an exact quote from Mohammed whereas you can find no hint of violence in Jesus.

Maybe that brings me towards what seems to me the great distinction between Christianity and Islam. We share the belief that God is one. Much of what we believe about the spiritual life is similar But there is one great distinction. How are to understand God. Let me point you back to William Sloane Coffin “Jesus is also a window to divinity. When we see Jesus scorning the powerful, empowering the weak, healing various hurts, we have seen transparently the power of God at work”. Or as John puts “The word became flesh and we beheld his glory”. When I think God I think Christ – when I see the crucified one I say - that is what God is like. No Moslem would say that. To Moslem to see God in a person is *shirk*- a form of idolatry.

That puts me in a different religion from a Moslem – but it does not mean we cannot respect each other and seek to learn from each other.

God, creator of this world, one yet divided,
Forgive us that we allow divisions
Between ourselves and peoples of other faiths
And so add to instability in the world.

Teach us that it is the responsibility of us all
To reach out with hands of friendship
And build safer communities.
Help us, God pf all, to work for peace. Amen.

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