

Islam, Christianity and Modernity

An Introduction and Summary by the Editor



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The heading says it all. How do we, as those concerned about the mission of the church in today's world, see the complex phenomenon of Islam? This is such a complicated issue and such an important one, I thought we needed a spectrum of opinion from a variety of commentators. So I asked six mission scholars and practitioners to respond to some questions about Islam and its relation to Christianity and modernity. They all received the same questions and their answers are given in this edition of *Encounters* in full. None of them saw each other's answers so there is inevitably a small amount of repetition. Below is my summary of the contributions under each heading (with the questions), but it is quite brief and I do urge you to find time to read the responses in full. One warning: all the respondents are Christians. I did think about inviting Muslim scholars to take part, but that was not the way it worked out – another day perhaps. Also one request: rather to my surprise most of the respondents agreed with each other about taking a fairly relaxed and unthreatened approach to contemporary Islam. I wonder whether the Christian public at large agrees with this approach. If you are one of those who disagree, and I know some of you are out there, do write in (via our web-site) and let us know.

1. Historical legacy

In what ways does the history of Islamic civilisation, in particular its dramatic expansion but also its sense of being under threat with the rise of the West, contribute to Christian-Islamic relationships? In other words what is the historical legacy that we carry with us into the twenty first century with respect to Muslim/Christian relationships?

Because Islam has a more integrated understanding of faith and society, the historical legacy is more important to it than to Christianity. This legacy includes: the way that Islam rose as a response to Byzantine imperialism and discrimination, at the same time profiting from that Empire's weakness; interaction with Nestorian Christians; the key role of the Middle East in mediating between the wealth of the Orient and the West (until the discovery of an alternate trade route – a key moment); the massive effort of the Roman church to retain its dominance in the Mediterranean and allied lands; the Christian philosophic interaction with Islam via Averroes and others on one side, and Aquinas on the other leading to a rationalistic Western outlook (and perhaps thence to the Reformation and the Enlightenment); the end of the Ottoman Empire together with the rise, after the First World War, of Middle Eastern nationalism and the discovery of Middle Eastern oil (a period which coincides with the rise of the key Islamist thinkers of the twentieth century). No wonder we are in a power stand-off, indeed we have experienced 'fourteen hundred years of misunderstanding'. It may be also that Islam finds it extremely difficult to accept a period when it is politically at a disadvantage, possibly because there was no initial period (contrast Christianity) of suffering as a persecuted minority. It is the movement from initial dominance to a more or less equal tension to contemporary disadvantage which is such a troubling legacy for Islam. On the other hand, some have suggested that recent hostility is a product, quite specifically, of Western colonialism. Finally, perhaps Islam *despises* Western decadence and looks back to the early days and the collapse of the Byzantine opposition as a portent of the collapse of another decadent Empire – the secular West.

2. Violence and persecution

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Christians routinely persecuted other Christians and fought wars about doctrinal differences. They also persecuted those of other religions (Jews etc.). On the whole this is no longer the case. However, inter-communal violence (e.g. Shias and Sunnis) and persecution of those of other faiths do quite often continue to be the case as far as Islam is concerned. Is this a fair representation of the situation and if so, why does this happen?

We must distinguish inter-communal strife within Islam and persecution of non-Muslims. The former is an occasional feature of Islam but it is common enough in the history of all religions (including Christianity: think of Northern Ireland). In any case we must allow for political tensions, the likely genesis, for example, of the strife between Shias and Sunnis. With regard to the persecution of other faiths, first of all Muslims themselves disagree about this issue and, of course, local factors (such as Western imperialism) often play an important role. Under the right conditions change in the direction of greater tolerance (i.e. where that is not already the case) may come, though it may take time. Meanwhile we should remember that Christians, or those perceived to be so, have continued to be persecutors. Muslims have not forgotten Bosnia, for example, nor Chechnya. Also Muslims may define the attacks of Western secularist thought as a form of persecution. Secular ideologies are often violent, too. The twentieth century bears witness to that and Muslims see secularism as a product of the Christian West. Nevertheless Islam does have a problem. Forgiveness is not generally part of the picture. Attacking Christians may be seen as an act of 'cleansing' or as legitimate revenge. As for all of us, religious reasons can be used to cover up less honourable motives. Finally Muslim relations with other faiths can be, and indeed have been, friendly. India provides some examples.

3. Islam and 'modernisation'

Is it possible for Islam to modernise? Some have noted that, unlike Christianity, Islam appears to have had no Reformation and to have made little effort to accommodate with the Enlightenment. Firstly, is this a fair characterisation of Islamic history and secondly, if it is, do we see such changes as something likely in the future?

It would be wrong to think that Islam is incapable of change. For example, in the past it experienced a profound Rationalist movement, so much so that this was seen as a challenge to the *rational* basis of the Christian faith. Besides Islam *is* busily modernising today. There are a number of examples. Muslim intellectuals are grappling with modern realities and migrant Muslim populations are learning to adjust where appropriate. Even the current resurgence of more conservative approaches (e.g. Wahabism) is an evidence that change is possible. Sadly, change in an unhelpful direction may be the creation of Western insensitivity. It is important to be patient, however. Religious changes are often the most gradual. Think of the slow process of change in the Roman Catholic church. Not all change has to have the explosiveness of the Protestant Reformation. (Some scholars, it should be added, feel that Islam has already had *two* Reformations: the introduction of Neoplatonic philosophy in the Middle Ages and later – in the eleventh century – the introduction of philosophical mysticism associated with Al Ghazzali.) Finally, in what direction do we want Islam to change? Is Enlightenment thought really something we want Islam to accommodate to? Modernity has a massive record of intolerance too.

4. The 'soul' of Islam

Edward Said, among others, has suggested that what we are seeing today is not so much an attack by Islam on the West but a struggle within Islam for the 'soul' of Islam. Do you agree with this?

An important reminder to begin with is that there is no single 'soul' of Islam. There always have been many discourses. However it is true that there are important struggles going on within Islam, and at the moment they are very 'public and world encompassing' ones. These can be characterised in a number of ways: between Shias and Sunnis (possibly more important than differences over the response to modernity), between a minority of extremists and a majority of moderates, and between those with different responses to the part that the West is playing in catalysing and complicating the conflict.

5. Is Islam a threat?

Is Islam a threat – to Europe, to Britain, to Christianity, to Western civilisation? Why has it become, apparently, an increasingly fearful proposition in Western nations? What evidence is there either way?

One view is that there is a threat from Islam, but in a sense it is a good threat (perhaps it might be better to call it a 'challenge') as it may help Christians identify and stand up for a just world community. This in turn may give an opportunity for others to discover the gospel. Islam is certainly a competing ideology, but there are many of these in the world. We cannot use 'threat' in a more dangerous sense. Others might say that Islam is not so much the problem but rather the whole question of violence in religion which is a world-wide phenomenon. We would therefore be unwise to pose the problem in terms of a 'clash of civilisations', particularly in the light of the amazing interdependence of modern times. Again, the fault is not all on one side. Muslims feel alienated by their marginalisation in the West, and their quarrel is more with the secularising tendencies of the West than with Christianity *per se*.

6. Are Muslims threatened?

Does Islam feel threatened? Is its present behaviour – for example over the Danish cartoons – an indication of strength or weakness?

Muslims will continue to feel threatened (and respond in threatening ways – the whole doctrine of *jihad* is based on the idea of defending the faith) when the attitudes we in the West display to them continue to be colonial. Of course there can be over reactions and the Danish cartoons affair may be one such (both sides certainly needed a dose of better cross cultural communication), though it may also have helped Muslims to feel that they had international support. The protest certainly had global dimensions. What the affair also revealed was the inability of secular thinkers to understand the power of religion.

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