



# Islam, Christianity and Modernity

## Question and Answer

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Though there is a good deal of thought going into questions about how we can 'reach' Muslims, perhaps a deeper and more difficult issue is: what is our starting point as far as Islam as a religion is concerned? What do we think about Islam and its relationship to Christianity and to Western modernity?

### 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?*

Historical Legacy – The legacy is the struggle of a religion that has an integrated understanding of faith and society confronting other social and political systems. The first great struggle was with Imperial Byzantium. The rapid early spread of Islam was on the back of 'Christian Byzantium' (Christendom) having disenfranchised other groups who understood themselves as Christians. The 'heretics' (Copts, Syriac & Armenians) were paying high taxes to the Christian Roman overlords, when they were within the boundary of Byzantium. The Christians outside Byzantium (e.g., in the Saudi Peninsular and Persia) were politically viewed as outsiders. Their initial responses to the political power and armies of Islam was to be grateful for a power stronger than a decaying Rome, that would reduce the taxation they faced. In some ways, it was the serious failings within the Christianised world that laid the foundation for the rise of Islam, and the political shape of Islam was but an echo of the model of Byzantium.

Popular understanding of Islam seems to forget that it did not rise up in a vacuum. Even the *dhimmi* system had its roots in practices that already existed, as did the way respectable women identified themselves by veiling their heads. The high culture that developed through interaction with Aristotelian philosophy, most notably in Baghdad and in Spain, was mediated by (probably) Nestorian Christian thinkers who had positions in the employ of the Baghdad Caliphate. Prayer patterns and religious habits of Muslims mirrored those of the Christian communities and the ascetics of the Middle East. David Kerr poses the idea that we could consider Islam as the first expression of 'Liberation Theology'.

Islam never has had a history without Christianity (or Judaism) and defines itself in relationship to them. We belong to the foil against which Islam defines itself. It can be a relationship of love: "Nearest in love to the believers are the Christians", or it can be one of hate, in response to not being accepted. The defining document (the Qur'an) holds both parties to a relationship of uncertain tension. The history of Christian – Islamic relationship has demonstrated how difficult it is to sustain peaceful coexistence based on the premise that the human choice to differ ideologically is acceptable. By definition, Christianity ought to be able to find ways to do that. Some would want to say that as there is 'no compulsion in religion' the same freedom should be there in Islam, but the ways in which it is defined and constructed make that very difficult. Islam doesn't really have guidelines as to how to live as a minority, non-politically powerful, faith. Whilst Christianity does, the understandable outcome of social and political structures built on Christian foundations is that they are resistant to Islamicising aspirations, and so tension has and will occur.

Western threat, in relation to Islam and to the Arabs, has always been related to economic power. The Saudi Peninsular and the great Middle Eastern cities were key links between the wealth of the Orient and the West in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. During the European 'dark ages', the Muslim world had a significant hold on international commerce. The opening up of the sea routes, around the southern tip of Africa, by European powers, changed the balance of power. They also opened the way to Christianising different parts of the world. Trade and the spread of faith communities have always gone hand in hand. The partnership has fed the Islamic understanding of Western hegemony. It is easy to see how Christian motives and aspirations can be misunderstood.

The whole process of the European Enlightenment, French Renaissance etc, has as its background not only extreme practices of the Roman Church as they impacted those on the inside, but the influence of the Islam of Andalusia. The Spanish Inquisition, including the expulsion of Jews and Muslims, is one part of the massive effort by the church to assert full geographical control. Christian Theism can also trace its roots to the need to respond to the impressive rational philosophy of Averroes (Ibn Rushd), with Thomas Aquinas commissioned by the then Pope to produce a response, which he did by writing *Summa contra Gentiles* (see e.g. 'Engaging Unbelief' by Curtis Chang, IVP). Arguably European rationalism, and the consequent development of the 'modern' mindset, where God becomes consigned to private religion, is the product of this process. There is a case to be made for understanding the way in which the modern western world developed as being at least to some extent due to the perceived threat of Islam as the Middle Ages drew to a close.

I am not familiar with the content of the writing of the main Islamist ideologues. I have the impression that they are conscious of aspects of the relationships between Christendom and Islamic nations over the centuries, and that people like Sayyed Qutb had a reasonably astute understanding of the development of modern Western thought, to the extent that this actually promoted his resolve to know and live out a true, non-dualistic monotheism as defined by the Qur'an and Sunna; the West had not got the answers. It was for Muslims to find the answer in their own faith. (see John Esposito 'Islamic Threat', and Bill Musk 'Holy War')

The break up of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War might look like the dismantling of anything that was left of Islamic power (controlling trade from the East to Europe), but in retrospect it seems more like the stirring of the ashes that provoked the phoenix to arise. The ending of colonial role and the need for independent countries to find their own identity, along with the discovery of major oil reserves, have all contributed to the emergence of our present situation, where once more at an international level we are trying to find ways to get along (or to use and exploit one another, etc.). Most of the key Islamist thinkers of the twentieth century were approaching adolescence when the Ottoman Empire was being dismantled, and were significant influencers when, at the close of the Second World War, countries gained colonial independence, and the State of Israel was formed. Whilst the historical convergence of events might have had a variety of outcomes it is not difficult to see how, given the wealth advantage of the West up until the discovery of oil, significant parts of the Islamic world have wanted to re-establish their own identity distinct from the West. Standoffs have always been bound up with issues of social and economic power.

## **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?*

Northern Ireland still comes up in conversation, and Bosnian atrocities are too recent for the Christian World to deny culpability. The wider Islamic World is conscious of Bosnia. I have seen collection points for Islamic charities collecting for Bosnians in shopping malls in the Gulf, and car stickers declaring ongoing solidarity with them on many a parked vehicle in Cairo, certainly in the last five years. So, the world does look a little different depending on where on the earth's surface you stand. Nevertheless, there does seem to be difficulty within the present Islamic world to find ways to break the cycle of violence and revenge. The interpretations of the Sunna that are most prominent and influential seem to be those that give priority to assertiveness and punishment. Even though there are Muslims who would want to define *jihad* in terms of personal internal struggle to be obedient, it would be unusual for that struggle to be defined in terms of being able to forgive someone. Issues of honour and shame, both individual and of community, are major forces shaping the nature of response that the West tends to forget or ignore. They make the issue of forgiveness complex and difficult.

Persecution of Christians can be 'cleansing of the land' kind of acts. They can be acts of jealousy (because of the way local Christians seem to have a link with the wealthier West), but are more likely to be an anti-Western act. The West is opposed for both economic reasons and because its values and influence have the potential to undermine the unity and 'purity' of the Umma. Local Christians can seem like the leading foot-soldiers of the Western advance into a region, and are therefore targets. There are acts of persecution which are plain opportunistic, as with false use of the blasphemy law in Pakistan: if you want the land of local Christians then stir up trouble with one of them by accusing them of blasphemy, and the community will have to leave. Religion gives an excuse, but is not actually the reason behind the persecution. (Greed and selfishness are).

### **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?*

From the very beginning there have been divergent positions in Islam, including those who argued for the role of reason in making judgements about right and wrong, and those who understood that the Qur'an and traditions were sufficient without 'reason' being needed for their interpretations. The Rationalists who were seen to be such a threat to European thought at the time of Aquinas were deemed heretics by some of the more fundamental Muslims of their time. It is hard to know whether there will be a fresh pendulum swing that brings a change in the major emphasis world wide. Aggressive opposition to Muslim communities will not promote it. But then it is perhaps true of both Christendom and the Islamic world that their greatest times of peaceful existence with people of other faiths have been when they have enjoyed a secure dominance. (It is equally true of international capitalism, Hinduism and Communism, as far as I can see, and is not particularly a comment on religion, but on the way even lions are of little danger when they are not under threat.) I don't expect we will ever be free from the threat of difficulties.

### **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?*

Yes – but I think that Islam has always had a troubled soul. The thing is that at this point in world history it is very public and world encompassing.

## 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?*

What do we mean by threat? Disruptive to static patterns of existence? 'Yes'. Likely to take over? 'No'

Western civilisation is going to have to come to terms with China and with the global south in new and different ways. The best outcome would be to find new ways of being a just world community, which is what the new heaven and the new earth will be; I guess that is a threat to Western civilisation. Islam certainly pushes the west to check out its premises and aspirations.

Christianity remains Christianity. Islam resists the spread of Christianity, but there are Muslims who become Christians because the very resistance by Islam to Christianity reveals the nature of the Gospel to them. How much the growth of one in comparison to the other will affect respective numbers I do not know. There will be a time when the love of many will grow cold, and kingdom will be divided against kingdom, but Jesus will be vindicated. In the meantime, the presence of Islam can be a great stimulus for helping people to discover the wonderful message of the Gospel.

## 6. Are Muslims threatened?

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

Yes, to feeling threatened - see above – and note that ALL jihad is firstly about the struggle to keep the faithful faithful. Sometimes the way to do this is seen to be through opposing the outsider. 'Its present behaviour' does indicate it has at least enough significance for us to notice when it cries out. I'm not sure I really understand the 'strength / weakness' language. For example, are Danish cartoons an indication of strength or weakness on behalf of the West?

Post Script. I would like to recommend two books to accompany this conversation as a whole:

Bill Musk, *Kissing Cousins* (Reviewed in this Edition of Encounters)

Meic Pearse, *Why the Rest Hate the West*

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