

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?

Three things, I suggest, are particularly significant: 1. Muslims look back to a Golden Age in the first centuries when Islamic rule stretched from Spain to the borders of China and India. 2. For several centuries Islam and Christendom in Europe were eyeing each other across the Mediterranean with fear and suspicion and there was an uneasy balance of power, which was upset (for example) by the Crusades, which had a serious effect on Christian-Muslim relations generally and on Christians in the Middle East in particular. 3. Centuries of European imperialism produced a great reversal, in which the vast majority of Muslims all over the world came under the power of western 'Christian' powers. And now, although the old empires have gone, western domination - political, economic and cultural - continues, and is seen by many Muslims as more pervasive and pernicious than the old imperialism. This historical legacy is all bound up with questions about political 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?

I think we need to separate (a) inter-communal violence among Muslims from (b) persecution of non-Muslims. These are two quite separate issues. Regarding (a) while there are some serious and significant differences between Sunni and Shi'ite Islam, where there has been conflict between the two communities there have been particular local factors, both political and social, which have contributed to the conflict. With all that has happened in Northern Ireland, we should be careful about making too much of these conflicts between Muslim communities! People in glass house shouldn't throw stones!

Regarding (b) there has always been a tension within Islam between positive attitudes towards Christians, who are regarded as 'people of the Book', and negative attitudes which see them as unbelievers, guilty of 'shirk' (association) and therefore as unbelievers. While many of the scholars today tend towards the first view, many ordinary Muslims on the street tend towards the second. Muslims have always assumed that, in an ideal world, Christians

and Jews should live under the political rule of Islam, but their official teaching has always told them that there should be 'no compulsion in religion'. In all the situations where there is persecution of Christians, I believe it is important to look not only at the legacy of the negative attitudes towards Christians, but also to particular local factors which have contributed. For example, the fact that Christians in many parts of the world today are inevitably associated in people's minds with America, its Christian president and its foreign policies, is bound to make them a special target for attack.

The engagement of Muslims with the West and its approaches to human rights is making many of them much more sensitive to the issue of the persecution of Christians, and a number of Muslim leaders in recent years have challenged the traditional Islamic teaching about Apostasy. It will take many decades - even centuries perhaps - for this new thinking to filter down to the village level. But Christians must be honest enough to recognise that this re-thinking is going on in certain circles.

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?

Of course it's possible for Islam to modernise! It may not have had its Reformation, but it has had its Rationalists in the past, and the impact of Western influence led in the 19th century to the movement of Islamic Modernism or Liberalism, in which a number of Muslims did their utmost to demonstrate that Islam could be very rational and adapt to the modern world. At the present time I think we are witnessing an enormous struggle going on within the Muslim world between the traditionalists and the modernises. Some really do feel torn apart over issues like human rights.

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?

I would express it differently and say that what we are seeing is an attempt by Western powers (particularly the USA) to dominate people who happen to be Muslims. And there is a very fierce struggle going on within Islam for the soul of Islam. Gilles Kepel's 2004 book has an appropriate title: 'The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West'.

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?

My first response is to challenge the use of the word 'Islam', because it can so easily suggest that Islam is monolithic (which it isn't) and that all Muslims think the same way (which they don't). I try to speak much more these days about 'Muslims' than about 'Islam'. And we need to trying to separate all the different factors which go to create the feeling that there is a

threat - the question of numbers, the cultural questions, the theological questions and the political questions and so on.

One of the major problems has been that many of the Muslims in Europe don't want to integrate and that Europeans haven't always made them feel welcome. Of course it's true that some Muslims in Europe have a missionary agenda and we mustn't be naive about that. But the Christian churches have hardly got their act together very well, and many secular people in public life simply don't know how to handle these people who want to bring God in to the public sphere.

I personally don't like to use the language of 'threat' but rather the language of 'challenge'. It's much better to try to train and equip Christians to relate to Muslims if we are responding out of genuine understanding and love than if we are responding out of fear.

6. Are Muslims threatened?

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

I believe that Muslims all over the world do feel threatened. They feel they are in a weak position because of the enormous power of the West. The cartoons seemed to them one more example of the arrogant, secular, irreligious West trying to humiliate Islam. And it is this sense of humiliation which lies at the heart of the reaction of many Muslims. But the protests over the Danish cartoons have also given them a certain feeling of strength in that they realise that their protests can and do make a difference in some situations. Globalisation makes a local issue very international and their voices can be heard so quickly right across the world.

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