



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?

The rapid expansion of early Islam was a result of a number of factors: The Eastern Roman Empire's ideological and cultural separation from the West, its continuing conflicts with Persia, new invaders, and internal fissures between the representative Christian theological positions, all contributed to the weakening of the Empire. When Islam, with its nascent zeal for the expansion of 'the model theocratic state', founded by Muhammad in Madina, reached its shores, the Byzantine Empire was simply not able to put up a robust resistance, and it was finally absorbed by the Ottomans. The so-called Modern West is religious and morally defunct, economically ambitious, and politically divided. It seeks to create a semblance of unity through its awkward subscription to the principles of modernity where religion is marginalised or removed from the public sphere. Far from perceiving the West as a threat, revivalist Islam sees the West as the object of its mission, a sphere where the early expansion of Islam as a religio-political ideology can be re-established.

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?

Muhammad is said to have himself predicted the division of Islam into over 70 sects. The two of the major sects are the Sunni (majority) and Shia (minority). The fundamental reason for the division between the two was the issue of succession. The divine right to 'rule' predominated in the early Islamic theocracies (Caliphate) and although the Shia too succeeded in establishing their own centres of theocratic power, they were, despite representing the 'family of Muhammad' initially a much persecuted group. This conflict continues, as the essential nature of the disjunction between them has never been religious or theological but political.

There are different types of violence; physical violence is one. I do not think, Christianity is free of violence anymore than Islam, and this is despite the cross. A closer study of inter-denominational relations within Christianity may reveal serious problems among us. Many

Muslims see the 'Western' military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan as a new wave of the Crusades. It is a moot question as to whether there is any sense in which the inherent motives for war in Iraq were religious.

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?

The reality is that Islam has had at least two reformations: one took place with the introduction of Neoplatonic philosophy when the concrete theological worldview of Islam was challenged through Islamic Neoplatonism. Many would argue that this was essentially a Shia (Ishameli) phenomenon and hence, marginal, but actually the introduction of Neoplatonism went beyond the Shia as it touched off Arab Philosophy whose representatives, al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) preserved the knowledge of the world during a time when the West was passing through the 'dark ages'. The second reformation took place in the 11th century through the efforts of the great Mystic-Philosopher-theologian, al-Ghazzali. Arab philosophy survived largely in Islamic Mysticism which was tolerated by the increasingly traditionalised Sunni Islam but was finally reconciled with the mainstream theological and juristic traditions by al-Ghazzali. Mystical Islam survives in the majority Islamic world of South Asia, SE Asia, North Africa, Syria and Turkey... and is characterised by its moderate and eclectic ethos. Not much emphasis is laid on this tradition in Western writings on Islam.

Even traditional Sunnism has not been monolithic. Internal debates and 'schools' of theology and jurisprudence have ranged from strict to moderate and liberal traditions. For example, the traditional Islamic jurisprudence that defines South Asian Sunni Islam has always been the moderate Hanfis School (followed by approximately 45 % of the Muslim world) whereas the stricter school of Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal is followed by approximately 5% of the Muslim world and is located largely in Saudi Arabia.

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 think what I say below partially addresses this question.

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?

I think violence associated with religion and 'religiously motivated conflicts' transcends the simplistic polarity of 'Islam and the West', 'Islam and Christianity'. The bases for this are: Firstly, 'religious violence' is a much broader phenomenon. It manifests in more than one centre, both inter and intra-religiously, all over the world. The fact is that we live in a very

West centred world and hear mostly about things if they are related to us. Religious violence between Hindus and Muslims, Buddhist Sinhalese and Tamils, Muslim Janjawid and Ethnic Muslims, Shia and Sunni, the Rwandan genocide etc. have seen millions dead. The prime example of religiously motivated violence is not the 9/11 and 7/7. More people are killed in the name of religion in the majority world than in the West.

I think the clash is between two 'secular' ideologies. These ideologies represent a sort of abstraction of religion: Islamist and western modern secularism. These have been simplistically represented as the clash between Islam and the West. European experience, as sociologists suggest, of modernity leading to the marginalisation of Christianity does not seem to have affected other parts of the world. The majority world is learning to live with modernity without necessarily letting secular humanist values govern societies. Islamism is a reaction against this western abstraction of Christianity and Christian values and not against Christianity. Islam can never justify violence against Christians – it is simply not part of the equation. Islam also cannot be against religion – it opposes what it perceives as a lack of religion and seeks to fill this vacuum with faith in God as the hall mark of life in its totality.

6. Are Muslims threatened?

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

Islam does not, Islamists do appear to be threatened, but that does not fully explain the Danish cartoons affair. Secular humanism can never understand the power of religion. (The closest it comes to recognising it is in the principles of 'self-censorship', 'political correctness' and 'fairness' which were obviously trespassed!) God, his messengers, his revealed books (and indeed those who are appointed as guardians) are objects of absolute veneration and not ridicule. What the cartoons did was to strengthen the Islamists as the ordinary Muslims felt drawn in to the debate. Muhammad, like Jesus is above reproach. Islam has had a long history of 'church-state' alliance, and ideological Islam sees political power and religious faith as inseparable. Criticism of Islam (God, prophets, scriptures) is seen as a criticism of that which represents the highest and noblest of human inheritances – just as a secular state dispenses justice for errant behaviour such as paedophilia, rape and murder, a theocratic worldview dispenses 'justice' for those who are, according to its laws, seen to be erring. This is not to suggest that criticism and innovation are not permitted in Islam. Early Islam was defined by plurality of theological and legal opinions. Sects manifest the power of internal critiques and this plurality still defines Islam.

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