

# Islam, Christianity and Modernity

## Question and Answer

---

Gregory Johansson. Gregory has worked for almost fifteen years in Amman, Jordan

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?*

Judging from my children's school books, many Muslims would tend to see the crusades, colonialism, the state of Israel, and the recent wars in Iraq, as all contributing to a single historical theme – that of western imperialism and exploitation couched in pseudo-religious terms such as “winning back the Holy lands”, the Christian “white man's burden”, and the “just war” of 1991.

Whereas early Christianity spread for the first 3 centuries as a persecuted grassroots movement, I think it is Dudley Woodberry who suggests that because Islam became an empire very rapidly, it perhaps did not have time to develop a “theology of suffering” with which to guide it in its current less-than-prosperous context.

### 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?*

Since our worldview forms the basis of our religion, perhaps a more helpful name for the “Wars of Religion” during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries would be the “Wars of Worldview”. During this period, modern and humanistic influences in Europe were impacting the way people viewed their world, and as theology was contextualised within these new paradigms divisions began to occur. As a simplistic example, it was entirely natural that increasing individualism would lead some to change their theology in the area of baptism; changes in worldview led theologians to “notice” verses that perhaps seemed under-emphasised in the existing religious traditions.

History shows that these divisions were often exploited politically by rulers in their power games. Mankind has always been reasonably happy to go to war 'in the name of truth'. And so there were many bloody clashes between Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists, as well as the brutal persecution of minorities such the Anabaptists, Quakers, Jews etc. The slaughter of tens of thousands of Huguenots during this period is just one sad example of this.

If we understand these events as “Wars of Worldview”, then it seems unreasonable to say that this sort of killing in the name of truth “is no longer the case” in the West. The Western worldview is now more secular than religious perhaps, but our leaders are still apt to exploit it in their power games. An example would be the atrocious government-backed abuse of coloured and native peoples that was occurring well into the twentieth century. How many millions have Westerners killed in the name of the “white man’s burden”, “civilisation”, “democracy”, “human rights”, and “freedom”? It strikes me as a little ironic that we should distinguish this violence originating out of a secular worldview from that coming from a religious worldview. It would be more honest to admit that as humans we all struggle to relate well with those of differing worldviews, and that this “tribalism” is a weakness that opens us up for exploitation by those who would benefit from inter-tribal war.

### **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 Islamic world is modernising. One only has to switch to al-Jazeera, or nose around the internet a bit, to see that modernity, postmodernity, reformation, pluralism, and secularisation are all hotly debated subjects.

However, I think there are many possible responses to modernity. We need to be careful about prescribing how Islam should respond to modernity and then using that to judge whether they have or not – like insisting on an Islamic Reformation for example. It is like asking “Is it possible for the Catholic Church to modernise?” A large proportion of Christianity did not make that radical break we call the Reformation, but one could hardly say that the Catholic Church has not responded to the Enlightenment or modernised. A more gradual response is also possible – perhaps preferable. Why then should we demand such radical breaks within other religions?

Incidentally, it is quite common these days to hear people railing against the intolerance of monotheistic religions. One wonders how far such people are willing to go to rid the world of such primitive intolerance! Actually, Modernity has been just as intolerant a worldview as any other religious one – perhaps worse. The worst aspects of Colonialism, Nazism, and Communism have all had their roots in modern thinking. Accommodating with the Enlightenment in no way guarantees tolerance and non-violence.

### **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’m not sure there is a single “soul of Islam” to be fought over these days. The Islamic World is definitely going through major changes right now, as is the rest of world; we are all struggling with the implications of globalisation and pluralism, and these paradigm-shifts are, in turn, transforming our institutions and ideologies. For example, everywhere one looks the “network” paradigm is undermining and breaking up traditional religious and societal hierarchies. The Internet and satellite TV networks are acting as catalysts here, and so

perhaps more clearly than ever before, the average Muslim is able to hear the many voices and interpretations – or ‘souls’ – that make up Islam.

Perhaps this was the most important aspect of the Reformation: the breaking up of monolithic Christianity into many interacting discourses. If this is the case, then maybe Islam has experienced the equivalent of the Reformation already?

## 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?*

Every worldview makes absolute claims about reality or truth, and defines what it is to be human. I think it is quite natural for people to feel threatened by another group that are making different truth claims. Islam does offer an alternative lifestyle to that of European neo-paganism. In fact, many of the aspects of the Islamic value system, for example the value placed on family and community, seem much closer to Biblical models and are a needed challenge to the rampant individualistic selfishness and nihilism in society today.

I believe the massive influx of Muslims into Europe and their higher birth-rates etc. will bring many changes. As they interact, European society, Christianity, and Islam *will* be forever changed. But is that a threat, or an exciting challenge? Many in Luther’s day felt his “Biblical” truth claims were a threat to Christianity, Europe, and civilisation itself. Now as we look back, we can see that was not the case. Instead, new paradigms have been incorporated into our worldviews, the interaction between different denominations has been enriching, and “civilisation” has stumbled onwards. European beliefs, lifestyle, language, architecture and culture are forever changed by the Reformation, yes - but who would want to revert to life in the 16<sup>th</sup> century? As we look back, what really stands out as a threat is not the dialectic clash of worldviews, but the selfish actions of opportunists that would exploit the inevitable tensions by scaremongering. These people are truly dangerous.

## 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, I think most Muslims would feel that there are some very real threats facing them at this time. “Gee thanks Bin Laden” is the title of a popular Arabic book these days, and that would well describe how many feel: misrepresented by the actions of the self-designated representatives of Islam and by the unfair western stereotypes that they have strengthened.

I think many on both sides of the cartoon incident felt their cherished worldviews were threatened, but we need to get used to that. It’s not so much a matter of strength or weakness, but more that globalisation has made us all neighbours and so we all need to get a lot better at cross-cultural communication. Some, quite rightly, defended the free press because it is a rare source of unbiased truth (at least potentially!), and hence it is an unassailable – in fact a *sacred* - pillar of our society that must be defended at almost any cost. Some Muslims defended the Prophet Muhammad for these exact same reasons. I think the real problem, however, was that people on both sides naively assumed that what they were saying was obvious truth that must be completely understandable and acceptable to the other side. These same people however, seemed uninterested in listening respectfully in

order to understand and empathise with the other side; the other side's words and actions were written off as incomprehensible – and therefore inhuman. The most elementary steps in cross-cultural communication are to put aside these ethnocentric attitudes.

Better cross-cultural communication is the answer, not more “tolerance”. Many of us in the West have exalted tolerance to the most saintly of virtues, yet we are blind to the hypocrisy we display in only bestowing our tolerance on those who share our worldview. That's hardly enlightened – even “primitive” jungle tribes do that! In a large proportion of the articles and comment I read during the cartoon affair, the true face of “tolerance” showed itself as merely the paternalistic arrogance of know-it-all modernity. As the writers of these articles let slip words like “barbaric”, “primal rage” and “uncivilised”, they betrayed the same old ethnocentrism that sanctioned our colonial fore-fathers' suppression of the natives when they got “restless at night”. I would personally feel threatened if this sort of attitude was projected at me! Do we really want Islam to modernise and become like us?

---

If you would like to respond to this article, please use the 'Voice your comments' form on the Encounters website ([www.redcliffe.org/mission](http://www.redcliffe.org/mission)). Alternatively, you may prefer to email your response to [mission@redcliffe.org](mailto:mission@redcliffe.org), in which case please remember to include your full name, your organisation/role and whether you would like your comments posted on the Encounters discussion board.