

Dr Kang-San Tan, Head of Mission Studies, Redcliffe College

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?

My reflections are limited to living and studying Christian-Muslim relations in South East Asia. In its origins, both Islam and Christianity are *missionary* religions sharing a common Abrahamic heritage. In their separate histories of expansions, Islam and Christianity went different routes, succeeding in establishing different centres of power, but intersecting and clashing at key historical moments such as the Crusades, Islam's occupation of Spain, and Western colonisation of Islamic states during the early twentieth century. However, the way Muslims interpreted these historical events seemed to be significantly different from the way Westerners considered these "historical legacies." Instead of looking at past conflicts as purely historical events to be reflected on dispassionately, Muslims (even moderate Muslims!) imbibed these events as part of their narratives for present and future engagements with Christians. For the Westerner, factors such as separation of state and religion, individualism, and the decline of Christianity contributed to a greater distance between the individual and Western historical legacy. Moderate and even secular Muslims take past conflicts such as Crusades, and nineteenth century Western colonisation more closely to heart than Christians in general.

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?

Persecutions still occur in a number of Muslim countries in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia, though far less so in countries such as Turkey, Malaysia, and Central Asia. There are both theological and social reasons for persecutions on Christians. Theologically, the Islamisation process must include the building of *ummah* (nationhood) and enacting *shariah* laws. Socially, Islam offers non-Muslims an opportunity to embrace the Islamic faith or to come under the Islamic covenant. Persecution often takes place when former Muslims convert to Christianity or when Christian missionary activities are perceived as a direct threat to the Islamic faith. Apart from these isolated cases, we must not forget that the majority of non-Muslims practise their faith freely within certain restrictions.

I think it is true that traditionally, direct persecutions against other religious minorities for religious reasons are less common in the northern hemisphere of the Western world, mostly due to prevailing Western values such as human rights, tolerance, and freedom of religion. However, I think Christians fail to comprehend the deeper and subtler forms of persecutions against Muslims. The majority of Muslim minorities in Europe, Russia and USA feel deeply marginalised and neglected by Western governments, societies and media. From the Muslim perspective, persecutions against Muslims are now initiated by Western Christian powers in Afghanistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Somalia. Even among moderate Muslims, there is a suspicion that Western powers continue to attack Islam through sophisticated means. Some examples include United States' role as protector of Israel instead of Palestinians, the European Union's perceived bias against Turkey, and the WTO and IMF roles as tools of the Western powers to marginalise Muslim countries in international trade. The West may forget the persecutions of Chechnyans in Russia, Bosnian Muslims in former Yugoslavia, and Uyghurs in China (which obviously is not under Western domination) but Muslims know that the Western media and Christian powers are less interested in applying standards of religious liberty for these persecuted Muslim minorities.

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?

Yemen, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Turkey, Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia are examples of countries applying a progressive brand of Islam in the modern world. Muslim intellectuals such as Fazlur Rahman and Suha Taji-Farouki are engaging with modernity and applying critical studies to reform Islam. Modern realities such as the existence of migrant Muslim communities in the West and the increased trade and communication between Muslim people and other faiths, should provide the social context for such attempts at rethinking and repositioning Islam as a progressive faith.

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 don't think we can separate the two, but I think Said is right from the perspective that the real fight is within Islam. However, the struggle is not primarily between moderate and fundamentalists engaging with modernity. The struggle for the soul of Islam is really between the shia and sunni brand of Islam: will globalisation bring them together in peaceful coexistence, in new synergistic theologies, or push them to radical unresolved conflicts?

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?

Islam is a treat to Christianity as a competing ideology, just as Buddhism, Atheism or Materialism poses a treat to the Christian vision of civilisation and world order. However, I think the kind of fear (Islamophobia) in Western minds are misplaced. Christians in Asia have lived peacefully with Islam, thrived and in some quarters emerged fairly strong.

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 think Islam is threatened by the pressures of living out its faith in a modern world, whereby truth-claims are questioned and challenged by adherents in a multi-religious and post-modern world.

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