

Dr Theodore Gabriel, Honorary Research Fellow and formerly Senior Lecturer in Theology and Religious Studies, University of Gloucestershire

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 Qur'an states that among the People of the Book and pagan Arabs, the Christians are the ones best loved by Muslims (Sura 5:85). I need not point out shared beliefs and scriptures: Jesus as a revered prophet, the Virgin Birth, monotheism and many others. The Crusades were more politically than religiously motivated. It was the Seljuk Turks hated by Arab Muslims also, who prevented access to the sacred sites and they were restored by Salah al Din after conquest of the Crusaders' kingdom. Christians were treated honourably by the Muslim kings of Spain, and their rule was often looked upon as the golden age of Spain and led to highly beneficial interactions in science, arts and philosophy. However, the history of Christian-Muslim relationships becomes vitiated when colonialism and now neo-colonialism of Muslim lands by the West happened. Muslims are enraged that in the Palestinian question the Palestinians are not treated fairly by the West, both in the initial settlement of Jews there, and supply of arms and unstinting support for Israel, in spite of many of its actions being unfair to the Palestinians, and the various atrocities.

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?

Muslim orthodoxy is strongly committed to its beliefs and does not take heresies lightly. This has been manifest in relationships with the Shi'a, the Ahmadiyya and even Sufism of earlier days. However it is my opinion that Muslims do not seek out deliberately to attack and destroy other faiths. In India, for example, in spite of some earlier iconoclastic ventures, they had good relationships with the Hindus, and Muslim rulers even married Hindu princesses. This accounts for the fact that even after four centuries of Muslim rule Islam is a minority religion there. I have already mentioned Spain under Muslim rule. In Kashmir it is political domination by India against the wishes of many Muslim citizens that is the cause of religious strife. On the other hand India has mutually harmonious relations with Bangladesh, a neighbouring Muslim state as well as many states of the Middle East.

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?

In my opinion Islam has not been static. It has absorbed much from indigenous cultures and practices, manifesting its myriad forms from region to region. There may not have been a Lutheran reformation, but Shiism, Sufism and Ismailism are examples of the diversity of thought in Islam. In the current context there has been a resurgence of Wahabism, with its more fundamentalistic and rigid attitudes to law, mainly due to the influence of Saudi Arabian finance, and secondly as a reaction to the perceived threat of globalisation through Western culture. But there are many thinkers such as Muhammad Abduh, and in more recent days Fazlur Rahman whose ideas about the need for flexibility in Islamic law are making an impact. I think there is a vast silent majority of Muslim opinion that subscribes to the need for reform. The West's war on terrorism and the blundering, insensitive way the USA and its collaborators have gone about in countering terrorism, have not helped the cause of this section of Muslims.

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?

In the light of my comments above it will be clear that I agree totally with Prof. Said. There is a struggle within Islam. As I have pointed out, we have the extremists and inflexible sections on one side, who are retrogressive, and, on the other, the vast, but not so vociferous section who would favour flexibility and reform and progressive changes.

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?

Certainly not. The reasons for the present insurgence have to be examined closely to ascertain whether there is an inherent hostility among Muslims to Western nations. In spite of the incidence of the Crusades, the Reconquista and colonial occupation, the history of modern interaction of the West and Islam seems to be one of symbiosis. Western technology has led Muslim nations to utilise their natural resources usefully and bring advanced technology and thus economic prosperity. The substantial influx of Muslims into the West also contradicts allegations of hostility to the West. On the other hand the issue of Israel and Palestine and the American quest to dominate Islamic nations of the Middle East and interference in their internal affairs have led to considerable Muslim angst, not against the West as such, but against some nations of the West. The theory of the clash of civilisations has to be discredited in the light of the amazing interdependence of modern times.

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 has a reason to feel threatened over certain developments. A spirit of neo colonialism among some western nations – mainly the USA and the UK, the attempt to control and manipulate events in the Middle East, the often unjust championing of Israel and its highhanded activities in Palestine. In addition there is the general tendency of Muslim youth to be influenced by Western media, television, the cinema etc. to the detriment of their own religious and cultural values. I feel the Danish cartoons is an isolated instance, and there is generally no attempt by the West to denigrate the religion itself. On the other hand there is plenty of criticism of Islamic culture and norms, the treatment of women for example. Muslims are very strongly committed to their religion and keenly defensive of its values. I feel that this is a strength, in that it supports cherished institutions in society - morality, piety and the family for instance. However, anything can be a weakness if taken to an extreme and if it breeds intolerance and lack of fair consideration and appreciation of other types of culture and values.

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