

**We should look past our fears
and the sensational images of the media**

A Measured Look at Islam

By Tom Lane

To many American Christians, Islam is a mystery. Our ideas and opinions of it are formed more by popular opinion than by determined study or by talking with the ever-increasing number of our Muslim neighbors. Pain and anger from the tragedies our nation has suffered at the hands of Muslim extremists may cloud our perceptions.

To help us meet the challenge of Islam, let's address some widely circulated misapprehensions about that faith, while highlighting genuine differences between Islam and Christianity.

Holy War and Peace

It is tempting to paint Islam as an intolerant, violent religion. The actions of militant Muslims, as well as some portions of Islam's scripture, might seem to supply evidence in support of this. The chilling word *jihad*, "sacred struggle," has entered the world's lexicon.

But we must be cautious in picking ammunition from the Koran. The verses notorious for their blood-thirstiness (Koran 9:5, 73; 66:9) could be compared with the Bible's orders to the Israelites to commit genocide against Palestine's men, women, children, and even the livestock. (Deuteronomy 20:16 enunciates the ordinance. Joshua 6:21; 1 Samuel 15:3; 22:19 illustrate it in action.) The times and historical contexts must be taken into account.

Developing amid tribal rivalry,



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Islam did make its initial rapid spread across Arabia and the Near East primarily by military conquest. But then, while Christian Europe wallowed in the Dark Ages, Jews, Christians, and Muslims together forged a civilization of stunning architecture, art, mathematics, medicine, astronomy, and philosophy in the Islamic commonwealth of the Middle East, North Africa, and Spain.

In Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, Islam arrived peacefully through trade connections, an Arab specialty. (Muhammad himself had led commercial caravans.) In these places, Islam prevailed by the superi-

ority of its ethical values, beginning with the honesty of those Muslim merchants. Today, Islam competes well with Christianity in Africa, and among African-Americans, because it carries no taint of association with colonial powers, and because of its color-blindness. Muhammad's first *muezzin*, the official who calls the faithful to prayer, was a black man, Bilal, one of his earliest converts.¹

The word *Islam* means "self-surrender," specifically, to God. (Hence, a Muslim is "one who submits.") This Arabic term is related etymologically to the word for peace, *salaam*, a cognate of the more familiar Hebrew expression, *shalom*. The universal greeting among Muslims is *As salaam 'alaikum*, "Peace be upon you."

Before persecution nudged him toward armed defense of the nascent Muslim community (and, next, suggested the utility of its expansion by force of arms), Muhammad won his first political victory by arbitrating a tribal dispute in the city of Yathrib.² Muhammad was first a peacemaker.

Some in the Western world look narrowly at the gory parts of Islam's history, while dismissing the fact that the overwhelming majority of Muslims are peaceful. How does Christianity fare if we apply the same rubric to ourselves? Christianity has often brought the world not peace, but a sword. The infamous Crusades, alas, were not an aberration.

The Portuguese and Spanish (after Ferdinand and Isabella defeated the last Muslim state in Spain) sought forced conversions in the New World, while plundering the indigenous civilizations. Christian fought Christian over sectarian differences in the Thirty Years War that devastated Central Europe. Protestants and Catholics still fight to control Northern Ireland. Christian Europeans built empires that subjugated native peoples throughout Africa and Asia, including the carving up of the by-then politically fragile, multinational, Islamic Ottoman superstate.

The United States is celebrated by many evangelicals as a “Christian country” from its founding to the present. What does the record show? A fine legacy of freedom and social reform, yes. But also persistent poverty in the midst of plenty, and lingering racial tensions. During a fratricidal Civil War, “each [side] invoked God’s help against the other.”³ America, in carrying out its “manifest destiny,” gobbled up much of Mexico in the land-grab war of 1846-48, nearly exterminated the Native American peoples, and brutally suppressed a freedom movement in the Philippines after the imperialistic 1898 war with Spain. Today, corporate profits may override moral principles in America’s foreign policy.

Adjusting Our Focus

When interpreting the Koran or Muhammad himself, a careful eye is needed to avoid misunderstanding.

For example, Christians sometimes ridicule the Koran’s sensual description of Heaven. The picture of an oasis where one is attended by beautiful servants would suggest paradise to an ancient desert Arabian, the Koran’s original audience. This image is properly interpreted as metaphorical. Do we embrace literally the Bible’s description of Heaven as a gigantic gemstone cube enclos-

ing a watered garden (Revelation 21:10–22:2)? Modern hermeneutics, even among most conservative Muslims and conservative Christians, respectively, is more discerning than that.

Christian polemicists disparage Muhammad’s character by noting his many wives. Some of these marriages were for love. Some, like Solomon’s numerous marriages, were for the cementing of political ties, and made peace among clans. Others served as a kind of social security, to care for widows and children.

Rather than exploiting women, Muhammad enhanced their legal prerogatives compared to the custom of his place and time. The downtrodden status of women in some Islamic countries (this is not true everywhere in Muslim lands) is not in keeping with Muhammad’s

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precedent. Some evangelical Christians make a similar error. Ignoring the prominence of women in Jesus’ life and ministry, they define “women’s role” in the church and home as one of subordination.

Some Christians preaching and writing against Islam make the jab that members of his own tribe rejected Muhammad. A visionary is often the object of scorn among his bewildered kin (Matthew 13:54-58). Shall we reject Jesus because He came unto His own and His own received Him not (John 1:11)?

Salvation by Allah’s Grace

Islam is sometimes seen as a religion that says people must struggle to win salvation by good works. The

Five Pillars of Islam, that religion’s nuts-and-bolts blueprint, are not a “plan of salvation.” Rather, they provide a well-rounded approach to spirituality.

The first pillar, the *Shahada* (“Bearing of Witness,” in Arabic), is a statement of faith, “There is no god but God.” One becomes a Muslim by reciting and believing this profession.

The declaration that Allah, the traditional high God, is the only God, was a revolutionary position in idolatrous seventh-century Arabia. No wonder Muhammad was rejected! Against the polytheistic background in which it originated, Islam uncompromisingly contended for one God. Islam today retains that historical emphasis. We recognize here a commonality with our biblical faith. The Israelites (Jeremiah 5:7) and the early Christians (Acts 19:26) were called to leave behind the worship of idols.

The second, third, and fourth pillars are calls to worship of that one God, to contemplation, and to renewal in prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage. Would that more Christians pause for prayer five times a day, as Muslims do. The fifth pillar makes responsibility toward others, in the specific form of charitable alms, a religious as well as a humane matter.

In giving charity, and in all relations within the community, the Muslim is called upon to emulate the benevolent character of God.⁴ Every chapter of the Koran⁵ bears the superscription, “In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.” The text of the Koran is filled with references to God’s forgiveness and grace. Muhammad’s preaching so stressed Allah’s mercy that some listeners thought he was identifying *Al-Rahman*, “the Merciful One,” as a proper name for God. Islam’s Sufi sects speak unabashedly of God as

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love, who created humankind for the purpose of loving us. (Islam does not, however, talk about God as “Father.” Such language, it is held, correspondingly casts humans as God’s children, tacitly elevating humans to a godlike level and compromising Allah’s uniqueness as the sole divine being.)

The Koranic view of good works is that they constitute doing right as God does. Lacking belief in a mediator before God, the Muslim is especially sober-minded about following the path of holiness prescribed in the Koran. But a Muslim can never be sure she or he has done enough good deeds to earn salvation. In the end, the Muslim, like the Christian, relies upon God’s beneficence to save.

Differences Remain

Make no mistake. There are formidable differences between Islam and Christianity.

For Christians, Christ, the Son of God, is God’s supreme self-disclosure, superior to but fulfilling the word delivered by prophets and angels (Hebrews 1:1-14; 3:1-6). The New Testament Scriptures are, consequently, the culmination of God’s revelation. For Muslims, Muhammad, who allegedly received God’s revelation through the agency of the archangel Gabriel, is the Seal (*khatimah*, i.e., close or last) of the prophets. For Muslims, therefore, the Koran completes and corrects the Gospels and Torah.

In Islam’s unsubtle monotheism, God can only be a unity. For Christians, God consists of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons in one entity. This is no mere disagreement about theological niceties; it has practical implications for daily life and life hereafter. While a Mus-



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Muslim women walk home from the market on the Muslim side of the Holy Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

lim Sufi may seek a direct personal experience of union with God through mystical exercises, we have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us (2 Timothy 1:14). The Muslim believes that on the Day of Reckoning, she or he will stand alone before the divine Judge. But we have an advocate

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with the Father, Jesus Christ, whose righteousness is our atonement (1 John 2:1, 2).

How do we meet the Muslim challenge? We can celebrate the great precepts of monotheism, mercy, and righteous living that we share with Islam. We can repent our shared faults. Then we may say, “You believe in one God, you do

well. Now, let us show you the way of God more perfectly.”

¹It has been claimed that Koran 3:106-108 says that black people are damned. In fact, the passage says that on the Day of Judgment, sin will be like a stain on the countenance, while the righteous will shine with joy. This is the familiar “light and darkness” figure of speech (compare Daniel 12:2, 3).

²After Muhammad’s death, Yathrib became referred to as *Madinat al-Rasul*, “The City of the Messenger,” or, as it is called today, Medina.

³Quoted, but with a change of verb to the past tense, from Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865.

⁴Caesar E. Farah, *Islam: Beliefs and Observances*, 6th ed. (Hauppauge: Barron’s, 2000), 129f.

⁵Except for surah 9, regarded by commentators as a continuation of chapter 8.

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