

ISLAM
THE MISUNDERSTOOD
RELIGION

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One of the strongest facts in today's world is that Islam, a religion which in many ways is almost identical with Christianity and Judaism should be so poorly understood in America and Europe. Since there are so many muslims, (350-million+) they control many strategic areas of the earth, it is essential that we understand them better. Look what happened recently to a distinguished group of muslims who came to the United States, they were insulted.

He was shown a mosaic in New York church and told "See!" "we appreciate your prophet too but in the mosaic, Jesus, Moses, and buddha were shown seeking men's souls with reason and light. Muhammad was shown with a sword offering conversion or death. Later he saw a movie in which brave and Holy crusaders were shown battling craven muslims for possession of the christian city of Jerusalem. The crusaders appeared as educated, sensitive men and the muslims as illiterate brutes.

A newspaper carried an account of Muhammad lead coffin, which according to legend, hovers mysteriously somewhere between heaven and earth. The news story naturally cast ridicule on such a belief. In several discussions the visitor heard his religion characterized as "sumptuous"-voluptuous-and pleasure loving. At a public meeting a speaker said as a joke--If a mountain will not come to Muhammad than Muhammad will have to go to the mountain. That happens to many Prophets.---Worst of all, whenever he went, this man was called a "Muhammadan" and his religion was referred to as Muhammadanism. These are 2 of the most unfortunate words one can use to describe this powerful religion. Let us see why these experiences would be so offensive to a believer in Islam.

THE FOUNDER

Muhammad (pbuh) the inspired man who founded Islam, was born about 570 A.D. into the Arabian tribe that worshipped Idols. Orphaned at birth, he was always particularly solicitous of the poor and the needy, the widow and the orphan, the slave and the down trodden. At the age of 20 he was already a successful businessman and soon became director of camel caravans for a wealthy widow. When he reached the age of 25 his employer, recognizing his merit, proposed a marriage. Although she was 15 years older than him he still married her and was a devoted husband to her until she passed away. By the age of 40, this man of the desert had secured for himself a most satisfying life. A loving wife, great children and wealth. Then in a series of dramatic and terrifying events, he began to receive through the angel Jibreel a revelation of God's Word.

Like almost every major prophet before him, Muhammad (pbuh) fought shy of serving as the transmitter of God's word, sensing his own inadequacy. Although he felt like that the angel Jibreel commanded him to "read". We know he was hardly able to read or write but he began to dictate those inspired words which would soon revolutionize a large segment of the earth. "THERE IS BUT ONE GOD". Muhammad's message infuriated those rich Arabs whose faith required many idols and he and his few followers were driven from Mecca, his home. He has now been forced to fight in defense of the freedom of conscience which he preached. He became an accomplished military leader. Although he repeatedly went into battle outmanned and outnumbered as much as 5-1, he won some spectacular victories. Later he became head of state and the testimony even of his enemies is that he administered wisely. The wisdom he displayed in judging intricate cases became the basis for the religious law that governs Islam today. In his final years he was invited to become a dictator or a saint, but he rejected both temptations insisting that he was an average man to whom God had sent another of his periodic messages to the world. By the way of force of his extraordinary personality, Muhammad (pbuh) revolutionized life in Arabia and throughout the East. With his own hands he smashed ancient idols and established a religion dedicated to one God, ALLAH. He lifted women from the bondage in which desert custom held

them and preached general social justice. Muslims think it particularly ironic when Muhammad is charged by western writers with having established a voluptuous religion. Among drunkards he abolished alcohol so that even today all good Muslims are prohibitionists. Among the lazy he ordained individual ritual prayers five times a day. In a nation that revelled in feasting he instituted a most rigorous daytime fast lasting a full month each year.

Western critics have based their charges of voluptuousness mainly on the question of women. Before Muhammad (pbuh), however men were encouraged to take innumerable wives. He limited them to four only and the Qur'an is explicit that husbands who are unable to maintain strict equality between 2 or more wives must confine themselves to one.

A widespread misunderstanding arises from Muhammad's promise of paradise. In a land of blistering drought and sandstorms he predicted that evil men would suffer the tormenting fires of hell whereas good men would be transported to a perpetual of cool breezes, comforting streams and beautiful houris. Western imagination, unfamiliar with this--last word, defined it by analogy to one of the ugliest words in English and jumped to the conclusion that Muhammad's paradise was to be a sexual debauch. They were wrong. A houri is a fair skinned black eyed woman created from musk and spices, incredibly beautiful and perpetually virgin.

Last summer I stood on the edge of an arid desert with one of Islam's greatest philosophers, and he said " Today much effort is being spent to prove that Muhammad's paradise was only symbolic. Wise men explain away everything. - But let me tell you this, I have lived my whole life faithful to God in this baking desert. I've avoided one earthly temptation after another in an effort to gain paradise. If I get there and find no cool rivers, no date trees and no beautiful chaste girls made of musk and spice to keep men company, I shall feel badly defrauded about the promises made." In all things, Muhammad was profoundly practical when his beloved son Ibrahim died and an eclipse occurred and rumors of God's personal condolence quickly arose whereupon Muhammad is said to have announced "An eclipse is a

phenomen of nature. It is foolish to attribute such things to the birth or death of a human being."

At Muhammad's own death an attempt was made to defy him but the man who was to become his administrative successor killed the hysteria with one of the noblest speeches in religious history. If there are among you who worshipped Muhammad, He is dead. But if it was god you worshipped, He lives forever.

Muhammad was wrapped in a shroud and buried in an ordinary tomb whose location has always been known. The story of the floating lead coffin arose in Europe in later centuries. These things explain why people who follow the religion of Muhammad do not like to be called "Muhammadans". said the desert philosophers last summer. A christian is a man who believes that crist was a part of god and the central fact of his religion A Muhammadan by analogy would have to be a man who believed that Muhammad was likewise a part of god. and the central fact of his religion. But Muhammad was a man. He married, had children, earned a living.-Dead and was buried in a grave like the rest of us. No learned man would worship Muhammad. It is God we worship. Therefore, call us muslims, those who submit to the will of God.

THE BOOK:

The Qur'an is probably the most often read book in the world, surely the most often memorized and possibly the most influential in the daily life of the people who believe in it. Not quite so long as the new testament, written in an exalted style it is neither poetry nor ordinary prose, yet it possesses the ability to arouse its hearers to ecstasies of faith. Its rythms have been compared to the beat of drums, to the echoes of nature and to the chants which are common in all early societies. It is written in Arabic and devout muslims have often insisted that it not be translated into any other language. One might expect tht such a wish would have labored to learn Arabic, not an easy language, just to be able to read their holy Qur'an and pray in the original form.

The Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad between the years 610 and 632 in the cities of Mecca and Medina. Devoted scribes wrote it down on scraps of paper, bark and white shoulder blades of animals. The early revelations were dazzling assurances that there was only one God. Merciful and compassionate, He is ALLAH, the creator, the maker, the fashioner, whatever is in the heaven and earth declares his glory and He is the mighty, the wise.

It was that this message that this message that swept away idols and inspired men to revolutionize their lives and their nation. In later years, when Islam began to penetrate large areas of Arabia and had acquired much power, the revelations dealt with the organization of society, its laws, procedures and problem. The Christians or Jews who reads the Qur'an finds himself on familiar grounds a good deal of time. If the following random verses, chosen from hundreds like them were suddenly read in a church or synagogue, the congregation might have trouble guessing where they came from.--" cried one of the brothers 'slay not Joseph but if ye must do something throw him down to the bottom of the well'; he will be picked up by the cravan of travelers. So also was Jonah among those sent by us. When he ran away to the ship fully laden, he argued to cast lots and was condemned then the big fish did swallow him.

Mary asked; How shall I have a son, seeing that no man has touched me and i am not unchaste?, The angel replied: So it will be. The lord saith, " this is easy for me" so she conceived him, and she retired with him to remote place. Mary revered names from Christianity and Judaism appear in the Qur'an, for example, five of the important chapters are titled Noah, Jonah, Abraham, Mary. Lacking specific chapters of their own, but playing quite important roles are Jesus, Adam , David, Goliath, Job, Moses, Lot, and Solomon. Islam is partlyfounded on the words of 4 prophets who lived before Muhammad,-Jesus, Noah, Abraham, and Moses. The Qur'an doesn't acknowledge that Jesus was the son of god and that he suffered death upon the cross: if Jesus were acknowledged the child of god, muslim believe it would compromise

God's oneness, the belief which is the cornerstone of Islam.

It would moreover be difficult thereafter to that Muhammad was the bearer of the final perfect revelation, as muslim do. The Qur'an is remarkable down- tp-earth in its discussion of the good life. In one memorable passage it directs-----
(When ye deal with each other in transactions involving future obligations, reduce them to writing... and get 2 witnesses so that if one of them error the other can remind him. This is justler in the sight of god, more suitable as evidence and more convenient to prevent doubts among yourself.)

It is this combination of dedication to one god practical instruction that makes the Qur'an unique. Each Islamic nation contains many citizens who are convinced that their land will be governed well only it its laws conform to the Qur'an.

Addition to the Qur'an, Islam relies upon "tradition" what Muhammad said and did. These are largely affectionate campfire gossip, the odds and ends that would be remembered after a great man died. A

About 200 years after Muhammad's death, more than 600,000 seperate anecdote about him were current and several great scholars undertook the job of checking them for historical validity. More than 597,000 were rejected. The remainder called the hadith, are accepted by all good muslims. Much Islam's common sense comes from them. For example:--- One dark night Muhammad had to escort his wife home from the mosque. On the way he saw 2 men giggling in the shadows so he called them to him. lifted his wifes veil and said, "see it is my wife with whom I walk." When the strangers protested that they trusted him, he said " I was not worried about your trust of me. I did not want your faith to be affected by your suspicions."

Once a Jew came to Muhammad and protested that his chief assistant had outraged Jews by claiming that Muhammad was more exalted than Moses. The prophet said to the assistant, " you should not have said this. the feeling of other people must be respected.

Also some of the profoundest elements of muslim faith and culture derive from these traditions. every muslim in beginning a meal or entering upon any other task repeats; BISMILLA-HIRAHMAN-NIRAHEEM (In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.) This is the opening verse of the Qur'an. Muslims greet each other with this traditional salutation. Peace be upon you. The whole ritual of congregational prayer is to take in worship through the traditions. Some traditions influenced western behavior: On 1 occasion, Muhammad saw a donkey being branded on the face, when asked why this was being done the herdsmen said, the romans taught us this to prevent theft. Muhammad reflected a moment and said, an animals face is the most sensitive part of its body. If you must brand then do it on the planks where the plesh is thicker. and the custom spread.

As a successful general, Muhammad left many traditions regarding decent conduct in war.;" faithfully carry out all covenants and agreements avoid treachery and do not disfigure the enemy dead. Do not slay children, women, old men or persons dedicated to the service of religions. Do not destroy sacred objects, orchards, or crops." Muhammad took a dim view of miracles, and rebuked those who sought them. Nevertheless several have been scribed to him.

The famous story of Muhammad and the mountain, however, relates to a clownish fakir that name who lived in Turkey centuries after the prophet. In a bit of horseplay he announced that on the morrow, he would make the nearby mountain come to him. when the mountain declined, he shrugged his shoulders and said, well, I'll goto the mountain than. Throughout the tradition, Myhammad appears as a saintly man, one whom his Jewish or Christian cousins would have recognized immediatly as deeply concerned about the nature of god. He preached that slaves should be set free, that father's should not kill unwanted baby girls that those oppressed by society inherit the earth, that peace is better than war, tht justice prevails. There is much

proof that Muhammad hoped for the day when all who shared a common belief in god would exist together in peace. It is well documented that one occasion when a deputation of christians visited him, he said, ' when time for prayers arrived-conduct your service here in the mosque. It is a place consencrated to ALLAH.'

THE RELIGION:

To be a muslim, one must submit to life disciplines.

- *1.) The muslim must confess that "there is no god but ALLAH" and Muhammad is hi messenger. This confession doesn't mean tht Muhammad was god's only prophet. The jewish prophets are included and the christian prophet Jesus is given special reverence. What muslim do contend is that Muhammad was the seal of the prophets who brought god's final message. His dispensation sums up and supersedes all other.
- *2.) The muslim must observe ritual prayers 5 times a day. First at dawn then at noon, then the afternoon. After that there is another at sunset and finally in the stillness of the night. All visitors to Islam testify that one of the most extraordinary sights in the world religion occurs when in a dimly lighted mosque, hundreds of men stand shoulder to shoulder then how and prostrate themselves as they face Mecca. It is in such prayer that the brotherhood of Islam is born.
- *3.) The muslim must contribute 2-1/2% of his gross wealth (not income) to charity every year like the christian tithe, this has become a matter of individual conscience. The principle however is of great importance to muslim nations for it justifies modern taxes for social welfare.
- *4.) The muslim must fast during the month of RAMADAN. It proceed as fasting during the daylight hours for one lunar month each year and it is amazing how many people devout themselves and do so. Just before dawn, a man takes his last food, drinks his last cup of water through out the entire day no matter how exhausting the heat, the true muslim refuses food and water. Then at dusk, he breaks his fast.

*5.) The muslim must phisically and if financially able should atleast once during his lifetime take a pilgrimage to the Holy City Mecca after which he is entitled to call himself Al-Hadd. This custom arose back when most muslims lived within a few miles of the Holy City. It is preserved today when men most travel across continents.

No other religion in history spread so rapidly as Islam. By the time of Muhammad's death in 632 A.D., Islam controlled a great part of Arabia. Soon it triumphed in Syria, Persia, Egypt, the lower boarders of present Russia and across North Africa to the gates of Spain. In the next century, Its progress was even more spectacular. The west was widely believed that this surge of religion was made possible by the sword. But no modern scholar accepts that idea and the Qur'an is explicit in support of freedom of coscience. The evidence is strong that Islam welcomed the peoples of many diverse religions so long as they behaved themselves and paid extra taxes. Muhammad constantly taught that muslims should cooperate with the " people of the Book" (Jews and Christians)... True, there were often wars between muslims and either Christians or Jews , The Qur'an contains passages of primitive violence realting to these wars. But testimony is overwhelming that followers of the book were usually given decent treatment sancuary and freedom to worship as they wished.

IMPORTANT FACTS

Many westerners accustomed by their history books to believe that muslims were barbarians, infedels and that they found it very difficult to comprehend how profoundly our intellectional life has been influenced by muslims scholars in the fields of science, medicine, mathematics, geography and philosophy. Crusaders who invaded the holy land to fight muslims returned to Europe with new ideas of love, poetry, chivalry, warfare and government.

Our concept of what a University should be was deeply modified by muslim scholars who perfected the writing of history and who brought to Europe much Greek learning. Although Islam originated in Arabia, today only a small percentage of the world's muslim are Arabians and less than a quarter speak Arabic as their native language. More than most religions, Islam preaches the brotherhood of all race, colors, and nations within its fold. Muhammad himself probably had exactly the same skin color as Jesus who was a sun-tanned brown colored man. But today his followers embrace all colors. Islam permits no priesthood and because Muhammad had to fight so bitterly against idols, His religion discourages portraiture.

Mosques are decorated with geometrical patterns only. If this article were to be illustrated by a magazine would be immediately confiscated in muslim countries. For long periods in history, muslims nations strayed far from the spirit of Muhammad and gloomy darkness settled upon much of Islam. If one focuses only upon the worst Persian and Turkish caliphs, one can easily condemn Islam as a religion that failed, but one can find similar dark spots in the history of Christianity. If one looks at the enormous good that Islam has achieved, however, and particularly if one considers the promise of this religion in New Nation like republican egypt, pakistan and Indonesia, one sees the permanent greatness of Islam. I have been studying Islam for many years and can not see any valid reason why this religion and Christianity can't cooperate. I know that some fanatics men in Islam preach JIHAD (holy war) against unbelievers and that they try to assassinate their own leaders to foment such war. But no sensible muslim listens to them. They are the equivalent of the hotheaded christian

knights back in the middle ages, vowed to exterminate all muslims and age cures such rashness. I can neither find any permanent reason why Arabs and Zionists should continue their temporary enmity. In the long sweep of history muslims and jews have cooperated in areas of mutual interest. True there have been repeated troubles but even under the worst caliphs. Jews held positions of influence and in general retained religious freedom with the muslims society. Today the state of Isreal is an exasperation to muslims especially to Arabs and a temptation to a rash action. But once the immediate and pressing problems have been settled, muslims and jews should be expected again to exist in harmony- as they once did for more than 1300 years. Of great importance to the world is the fact tht Islam is Unalterably opposed to communism. Sometimes when living among muslims I feel that god is a much greater reality to them than He is to christians. It is difficult to believe that muslims would willingly surrender their faith for a commuism which denies His existence. On the other hand Islam in in certain respects, thus if nations of the west by unwise economic or political moves were to alienate the muslim world or were to permit economic ruin there, I would expect much of Islam to embrace commuism shich attempting securely to hold on to ALLAH. People of the west will meet numerous problems in the muslim world. But many of them will be softened by a remark that Muhammad made to his followers, -"You will find your most affectionate friends will be those who say; we are christians."