

The Matter of the Muslim and Islam (Pamphlet 1) * Geoffrey Bingham

The Rev. Geoffrey Bingham, an Anglican clergyman, a teacher of interstate and international experience, lived and worked as a missionary of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in Pakistan from 1957 to 1966. He was the Founder–Principal of the Pakistan Bible Training Institute at Hyderabad, Sind. Later, he was Principal of the Bible College of South Australia, and Executive Director of New Creation Teaching Ministry.

Introduction to Our Subject

Because of the terrorist attack on the USA World Trade Centre in New York on September 11th 2001, a certain fear of Islam has emerged. The term Islam ('to submit' to God) is the system of all Muslims ('submitting'). It is questioned by non-Muslims as to whether this is an attack of terrorists who are fanatical Muslims, and does not represent Islam in general, or whether all Muslims at heart are so anti-Christian—as also anti-other religions—that, in their hearts, they applaud what the terrorists have done. It is claimed by the majority of Muslims that they are appalled at what the terrorists have done, and it does not represent their attitude at all. It is said that about 5 to 10 per cent of Muslims in Pakistan take up the attitude of the terrorists, and the other 90–95 per cent do not. The highly vocal minority are seen as rabble-rousers, and not as truly representing Islam in the 21st century.

All of us recognise that Muslims have much to resent in history at the treatment given them at Christian hands, e.g. in the matter of the Crusades. Islam, for its part, has militaristically fought against Christian nations and there is also deep resentment against Islam for what it has done in such wars. Most of North Africa was Christian but became Islamic at the point of the sword. Part of Eastern Europe and much of Asia has been invaded by Islam. These are all matters of history, and whatever hidden feelings of hostility which may have existed, the nations have had to live together in spite of religious and cultural differences, even though these may still run deep. We all, always, need wisdom.

Whatever may be the case in regard to terrorists, we are being urged by the leaders of many nations not to regard all Muslims as being guilty, by association, of crimes against humanity. It may well be true that Muslims on the one hand, and Christians on the other, would desire their faith to spread across the whole world, but that does not mean they are committed to do this by force of terror. In writing this pamphlet we thought it would be good to give some idea of what Muslims believe. On the whole they do believe certain things as Christians on the whole believe certain things, yet only the smaller percentage of members of both faiths are deeply committed to those religions. It seems that on the whole humanity desires to live as far as possible without warring. We say that some are engaged with their faith, other disengaged or not yet engaged. It will help all in the present crisis caused by the act of terrorism in America on September 11th, 2001, to get to know one another, and to see that terrorism is not, *as such*, the intention of Islam.

A Short Introduction to Islam

Muhammad

Muhammad (or Mahomet), the founder of Islam, was born in AD 570 in Mecca. He was of the family of Hasim, and the tribe of Quarash. His father died before his birth, his mother when he was six and his grandfather when he was eight and he came under the care of his uncle, Abu Talib. At 25 he married a rich widow, Khadija, who supported him. His first followers included 'Ali and Abu Bakr. Due to persecution in 622 Muhammad and his disciples migrated to Medina. There he raised successful armies, and in 630 he conquered Mecca and destroyed its idols. He died in Medina in 632 in the arms of his youngest wife Ayesha. He had one wife, Khadija until she died in 619. He then had at least nine wives. In Islamic belief Muhammad is the Seal, last and greatest of prophets, and Intercessor with God for Muslims on the Day of Judgment.

As a boy Muhammad had contacts with Christians and Jews but the churches were mainly Monophysite and Nestorian. It seems he learned material from the Jewish Talmud. He seems to have had little contact with the text of the Scriptures—Jewish and Christian—but he seems to have acquaintance with the OT and NT apocryphal books. He showed a religious disposition in praying and fasting, dreams and meditations in caves. As he grew he came to dislike the superstitions and idols of his own people, who worshipped many idols, and came to believe in one true God. About the age of 40

began his series of revelations which he believed came from God through the Angel Gabriel, who he seemed to believe was the Holy Spirit. The gathered collection of these later came to constitute the Koran (Qur'an) and each revelation is a chapter or 'Sura'. The Jews of Medina did not accept some of his practices, and some of the Suras differed from materials given in the OT. Of course there have been many criticisms of the man who wished to be prophet to his people and to give them a book just as the Jews and the Christians each had their own books.

The Hijra in 622, that is, Muhammad's leaving Mecca and coming to Medina where he was warmly received and fulfilled his vocation, has been said to be the beginning of the Islamic era.

After the death of Muhammad in 632 there were three who reigned successively as Caliphs in his stead (Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman) and the fourth was 'Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law who was assassinated in 661. Two main groups have grown up in Islam, the Shi'a or Shi'tes who saw 'Ali as the first genuine Caliph (ruler) or Imam (leader or 'pattern'), and the Sunni who are known as the Orthodox party and who hold to the traditional ways (Sunna) and particularly that of Muhammad. There are four schools within Sunni. They hold to the first three Caliphs as 'rightly guided'. There is deep division between the Sunni and the Shi'tes. There are many sects in Islam, the most famous being the Sufi or mystical sect. One group—the Kharijis—seceded from the Shi'tes, and in fact 'Ali was killed by one of them.

The Hadith (Traditions)

We do not understand Islam at all unless we understand the Traditions or Hadith by which the life of Islam is lived. The traditions of Muhammad and his followers are set out in these. Six collections of traditions made in the third Islamic century came to be regarded as authoritative by Sunni Muslims. The Shi'a Muslims had their own collection of five works of Hadith as acceptable to them, based on the authority of 'Ali and his followers. The Hadith has had criticisms, but the Koran is *never* criticised. 'Serious or trivial, his daily behaviour has instituted a Canon which millions observe to this day with conscious mimicry. No one regarded by any section of the human race as Perfect Man has been imitated so minutely'. The Hadith is the source of daily practical behaviour in Islam. Muslims imitate all Muhammad did in daily living, no matter what!

The Five Pillars

The principles of the 'Five Pillars' need to be fully understood to know how Muslims think and act. The five pillars of faith are (a) recital of the Creed, (b) prayer, (c) fasting, (d) almsgiving, and (e) the pilgrimage to the Ka'ba at Mecca in Saudi Arabia. The whole creed (Kalima) of Islam is really in the statement, 'There is no God but God and Muhammad is the Prophet of God'. This is what the Prophet Muhammad believed—'in God, Angels, His books, His Messengers in the Last Day . . . and in the Decree of both good and evil'. The manner in which one recites the Kalima is important, that is, it should be recited aloud; it should be understood with the mind and believed in the heart; it should be recited correctly and professed without hesitation.

The Muslim is required to say prayers five times a day at 'the hours'. He may pray alone, in company or in a mosque. Prayer is a strictly prescribed ritual of stances, genuflections and prostrations which differ slightly between the orthodox schools. The Friday prayer at noon is the most important and attendance at it is mandatory among adult males, and must be given in ritual purity. A sermon is delivered at this time. There would appear not to be any significant connection between prayer and ethics. Ramadan (the ninth month of the Muslim year) is a month of fasting from dawn until dusk, involving complete abstinence from all forms of food, drink, smoking, and sexual intercourse. Those excepted are the sick, travellers, pregnant women, nursing mothers and young children. It is said that in fact Muslims eat more during Ramadan than other times!

Muhammad, who felt deeply for the orphans and the poor, the destitute and needy, put heavy emphasis on alms-giving. Legal alms (*zakat*) are to be distinguished from *sadaqa* or free-will offerings. One gains merit more by alms-giving than any other works except martyrdom.

The last of the Five Pillars is the Hadj or Haji, that is, the pilgrimage to the Ka'ba ('cube')—12 metres long, 11 wide, and 15 high—and to the Black Stone within it (an oval 18 cm in diameter of black and grey stone, possibly a meteorite) said to be linked back with Abraham and which in Muslim

thinking goes back to Adam. This pilgrimage is to be performed at least once in a lifetime by all Muslims and over a million make the fast annually. Its rituals are many.

Jihad (Holy War)

Another religious duty is Jihad or ‘Holy war’. All Muslims who are male, adult and free to answer the call participate in Jihad against the infidels, that is, those who do not hold the faith of Islam. He who dies in a Jihad is a martyr and, as such, is assured of paradise. Sir Norman Anderson writes, ‘The Jihad, with the fanatical courage it evokes, has been by no means limited to the inception of Islam, and its possible relevance for the future cannot be ignored. The matter is greatly complicated, however, by the question by when such a summons can be regarded as legally valid. From the earliest times Muslims have divided the world into Dar al-Islam, where Islam reigns supreme, and Dar al-Harb (the abode of war), where the rule of Islam should be extended, if necessary by war. Polytheists were given the option of conversion or death, while the People of the Book (Jews or Christians) were given the additional alternative of submission and tribute’ (*The World’s Religions*, Inter Varsity Press, London, 1991). This issue is alive even today.

Shari’a (Law)

Shari’a (Arabic, ‘path’) is technically the Canon law of Islam. ‘In the Koran we have we gave you a Shari’a (open way) in religion’, Later it came to mean all the commandments of God concerning human activities. It is linked with the dealings between man and man. It has to do with marriage, divorce, paternity, guardianship, maintenance, wills and inheritance. The Shari’a has dealt with the matter of conquest, the differences we see between the ‘then’ of early Islam, and the ‘now’ of a modern age, help to explain laws which seem indeed strange to modern thinking. Many Islamic countries do not walk by the Shari’a, but the fundamentalists are working to bring it back.

Islam in History

We can only understand the Muslim when we know that he/she believes Islam has a great history, and looks forward to having a great history, no matter what the present time may appear to be. The quickest way to sum up the complicated Islam’s history is to do it by means of the dynasties. The table below is reproduced from ‘Dictionary of Non-Christian Religions’ by Geoffrey Parrinder (Hulton, London, 1971).

Islamic Dates and Dynasties

A.D.	
570–632	Prophet Muhammad
632–661	‘Rightly Guided’ Caliphs of Sunni Islam: Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān, ‘Alī
661–750	Umayyad Caliphs (Damascus: Syria, Arabia, Iraq, Persia, India, North Africa, Spain, France)
	756–1031 Spanish Umayyads
750–1258	‘Abbāsids (Baghdad: Iraq and beyond)
	Hārūn al-Rashīd
	868–905 Tūlūnids (Egypt and Syria)
	909–1171 Fātimids (North Africa, Egypt, Syria)
	1169–1462 Ayyūbids (Egypt, Syria, Yemen)
	Saladin
	800–909 Aghlabids (Africa and Sicily)
	1058–1147 Almoravids (Africa and Spain)
	1130–1269 Almohads (Africa and Spain)
	1250–1517 Mamlūks (Egypt and Syria)
	1038–1307 Seljuq Turks (Persia and Iraq)
1281–1924	Ottoman Turks (Turkey, Balkans, Arab lands)
	1206–1634 Mongol Khans (Mongolia and North China)
	1526–1858 Mughals (India)
	Bābur
	Akbar
	Aurangzeb
	Bahādūr Shāh
1924	Istanbul Caliphate ended by Mustafā Kemāl

If we were to read the history of Islam and see the many developments, changes in opinion, differences in conclusions within Islam, and the rise and fall of many movements which seem necessarily to have

happened in such a dynamic religion, then we will begin to know something of what we call ‘the Muslim mind’, but it is doubtful whether we could plumb it to any depth. In the ultimate I think the Muslim believes he is justified in life—and at the Judgment Day—simply on the grounds that he/she is a Muslim. That kind of mind is not missing in most, if not all, religions. What is noticeable is the rise of the West since medieval times, the immense colonising work which was carried out by Western countries, and then the vast changes to the whole world in the 20th Century. Understanding all of this demands much mature thinking, and self-examination, no matter what our nationality and religious allegiances are in this day. The 11th September event in the USA needs to be understood and the action to be taken assessed in the light of all history. Those of us who are Christians need to know the mind of God in the courses of action we will undertake. We must understand the power of God’s love and His righteousness and justice. God, of course is *now* acting.

Knowing and Approaching Muslims Today

Without deep investigation it would not be possible to know the mind and feelings of Muslims who have fled their own lands or have preferred another country beyond their own. The culture of Islam is the one they have known, and is the one they would naturally follow. Freedom from dominating and restrictive elements which have developed in certain religious cultures are appreciated by folk who have come to our shores. For the most part they seem happy at being allowed to develop their own lives. All ethnic groups tend to hold to their culture for at least the first generation. The children growing up in the new culture tend to conform to it, and to come to like it, and certain tensions between the children and parents arise. These are generally diminished as the generations pass, especially if the ethnic groups are Christian in Australia which is, generally speaking, Christian. Religious groups such as Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs keep themselves firmly in their respective faith yet are glad to be accepted as fellow citizens. Muslims have such a training and background that holds their members firm to the faith of Islam. Conversion to another faith is rare. Sir Norman Anderson comments (*ibid*, p. 128):

There can be little doubt that it is the Muslim’s instinctive feeling that the practice of his religion cannot properly be reconciled with living under the sovereignty of a non-Muslim government which, almost as much as the growth of nationalism, has led to the strenuous efforts witnessed during the last few decades in many parts of the Muslim world to achieve either nominal or complete independence: and by the success of most of these efforts Islam may be said in this respect partially to have weathered the storm. Even when independence has been won, however, the Muslim state must still face the problem of its relations with non-Muslim countries in a world where almost perpetual war or isolation is no longer practicable. An up-to-date example of this problem is provided by the Declaration of Human Rights now accepted by all Muslim states, except Sa’udi Arabia and the Yemen, which are members of the United Nations Organization. Yet the clause which affirms a man’s right to change his religion if he so wishes runs directly counter both to the Islamic law of apostasy and to the practice of most of the Muslim states concerned.

There are many complications in the history of Islam which have led to the present world situation, and there exist radical and moderate, conservative and extremist, traditional and fanatical elements in modern Islam, but the mistake should not be made of equating the term ‘Muslim’ with the term ‘terrorist’. These religio-cultural grades exist in most religions and indeed in most nations. How to detect the differences is difficult for an observer, and probably not possible. What then do we do? I believe we should approach a person of any faith, and whilst not ignoring his or her faith and culture we ought to recognise that he or she is a person created by God, whom God loves and for whom He sent His Son to be that one’s Saviour and Lord. We should meet them with the friendliness that is possible, and relate to them. We should not necessarily equate ‘Muslim’ with ‘terrorist’. If folk have become citizens of our country then they are fellow-citizens and should be recognised as such. My wife, family and I lived amongst Muslims in Pakistan and on the whole were treated well. At the time of the Partition of India and West Pakistan Muslims and Hindus killed and wounded each other to the number of millions, but Christians were not attacked. They gave help and comfort to Muslims and Hindus alike, whether in the form of food, medical help and hospitalisation or temporarily hiding them. This has been remembered over many years, and we should take note of this and have the same heart and mind. We live in strange times—apocalyptic times—and we need much wisdom. I believe we need to understand God’s wisdom and live in His love, knowing all is in His hands.