

Islam and Other Religions

Over the centuries of Islamic history, Muslim rulers, Islamic scholars, and ordinary Muslims have held many attitudes towards other religions. Attitudes have varied according to time, place and circumstance.

Inclusive Muslims focus on the similarities between people of faith in general and Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in particular, stressing the universality of Islam and seeing other religions as reflections of the same higher truth (albeit less perfect versions) . Many Muslims conclude that the other faiths must be tolerated and that Islam states this.

Other
Muslim groups take an exclusivistic approach. For example, they aggressively stress the differences between Islam and the Judeo-Christian community. This can lead to parts of the Muslim community holding beliefs like the necessity of bringing unbelievers back to the "Straight Path" by persuasion, or even force -- and then acting on such beliefs.

Both camps cite parts of Islam's highest canons, the Qur'an and the Sunnah, to justify their positions.

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Qur'an teaches that God Allah in Arabic has sent prophets to other peoples, revealing the true religion of Islam. Those peoples have rejected or perverted Islam. Muhammad, the last prophet the seal of the prophets, has called them to return to the true faith. Those who reject his message, when the truth of the message has reached them, are promised to be doomed to a fiery hell on the Day of Judgement Quran 29:68

The Qur'an distinguishes between the monotheistic People of the Book (Jews, Christians and Sabians), and polytheists or idolaters on the other hand. The People of the Book should be tolerated, even if they hold to their faiths; however, idolaters are not given that same degree of tolerance. There are certain kind of restrictions that are relaxed for Muslims, when involved with People of the Book, which do not apply to idolaters, such as Muslim males being allowed to marry a chaste woman from the People of the Book (Qur'an, 5:5), or Muslims being allowed to eat meat from the People of the Book .

According
to the Qur'an, Moses and Jesus preached the pure Islamic doctrine. Jews and Christians then strayed from strict monotheism. The followers of Moses earned God's anger by worshipping the Golden Calf. The followers of Jesus went astray by worshiping Jesus as God and belief of the doctrine Trinity.

O People of the Book, commit no excesses in your religion; nor say of Allah anything but the truth. The Messiah Jesus son of Mary was (no more than) a Messenger of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him; so believe in Allah and His Messengers. Say not "Trinity": desist! It will be better for you: for Allah is One: Glory be to Him! (far exalted is He) above having a son. To Him belong all things in the heavens and on earth. And enough is Allah as a Disposer of affairs.
(al-Qur'an 4:171)

Muslims
believe that due to human interference, some parts of the Jewish and the Christian scriptures are corrupted. The Quran calls itself Muhimin which means "quality controller". It claims that it upholds that which is truth in the Bible and rejects what is falsehood. Muslims believe

that Qur'an and Bible have the same source and that any differences from absolute similarities would either mean replacement of a new Law with the previous ones or correction of the message that got corrupted.

And

We have sent down to you (O Muhammad) the Book (this Qur'an) in truth, confirming the Scripture that came before it and Mohaymin (trustworthy in highness and a witness) over it (old Scriptures). So judge among them by what Allah has revealed. [Surah 5:48]

None of Our revelations do We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but We substitute something better or similar... (Surah 2:106)

Islamic

scholars generally divide the sections and verses of the Qur'an into two groups: the verses revealed in Mecca, and the verses revealed in Medina. The Meccan verses generally preach peace and accommodation, leaving it to God and the Day of Judgment to separate the believers from the unbelievers.

We believe in Allah, and in what has been revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Isma'il, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and in (the Books) given to Moses, Jesus, and the prophets, from their Lord: We make no distinction between one and another among them, and to Allah do we bow our will (in Islam). (Surat Al Imran; 3:84).

Those with Faith, those who are Jews, and the Christians and Sabaeans, all who have Faith in Allah and the Last Day and act rightly, will have their reward with their Lord. They will feel no fear and will know no sorrow. (Surat al-Baqara; 2:62).

Only argue with the People of the Book in the kindest way - except in the case of those of them who do wrong - saying, 'We have Faith in what has been sent down to us and what was sent down to you. Our God and your God are one and we submit to Him. (Surat al- Ankabut; 29:46).

The Qur'anic verses are interpreted in the context of the situation in the life of the Prophet. Hence, the Medinite verses focused, among other themes, on the topic of self-defense. These verses take place after Muhammad and his follows had taken refuge in Medina and taken up the sword against the Meccans who had taken the lives of many of the Prophet's companions and also purportedly injured the Prophet on a number of occasions. The verses instruct fighting against the unbelieving oppressors, and promise paradise to the faithful who fall in holy war, or jihad. It is important to note that the Qur'an directs Muslims to fight against militant aggressors in a formal war, which is a holy pursuit (hence 'Holy War') and with interpretation these verses cannot be used during peace or against civilians, the elderly, women or children, or to harm livestock, farms or trees. Muslims may not declare war, but they must defend their lives and property.

Critics such as Robert Spencer believe though Islam does not explicitly preach armed jihad, moderate Muslims' denial that the violence practiced by extremist Muslims can be read in the Qur'an cannot be upheld. He believes that preaching violence is implicit in the Qur'anic text.

The Qur'anic verses specifically direct:

Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loves not transgressors. (2:190)

And

why should you not fight in the cause of God and of those who, being weak, are ill-treated (and oppressed)? Men, women, and children, whose cry is: "Our Lord! Rescue us from this town, whose people are oppressors; and raise for us from Your side one who will protect; and raise for us from Your side one who will help! (4:75)

Therefore,

when ye meet the Unbelievers (in fight), smite at their necks; At length, when ye have thoroughly subdued them, bind a bond firmly (on them): thereafter (is the time for) either generosity or ransom: Until the war lays down its burdens. Thus (are ye commanded): but if it had been God's Will, He could certainly have exacted retribution from them (Himself); but (He lets you fight) in order to test you, some with others. But those who are slain in the Way of God,- He will never let their deeds be lost. (47:4)

And an announcement from

Allah and His Messenger, to the people (assembled) on the day of the Great Pilgrimage...But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the pagans wherever ye find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war) but if they repent, and establish regular prayers and practice regular charity, then open the way for them: for Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful. And if one of the idolaters seek protection from you, grant him protection till he hears the word of Allah, then make him attain his place of safety; this is because they are a people who do not know.

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Lord inspired the angels (with the message): "I am with you: give firmness to the Believers: I will instill terror into the hearts of the Unbelievers: smite ye above their necks and smite all their finger-tips off them." This because they contended against Allah.

(Wikipedia, Islam and other religions)

The links that bind Christianity and Islam
William Dalrymple

The

links that bind Christianity and Islam are so deep, and so complex, and so intricately woven, that the occasional confrontations between the two religions should perhaps more properly be looked upon as a civil war between two different streams of the same tradition than any essential clash of civilisations writes William Dalrymple.

Last

month, before the ruthless bombing of Afghanistan had begun, while the papers across Europe were still debating Silvio Berlusconi's remarks about the clash of civilisations, I was wondering around the backstreets of Istanbul. Passing along the Golden Horn in bright Autumnal sunlight I came across a magnificent tomb complex. A shady garden gave onto the courtyard of a mosque, behind which stood an octagonal tower, the mausoleum for the Ottoman admiral Kilic Ali Pasha. The Pasha, it turned out, had fought the combined navies of the West at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571 and was one of the few Ottoman commanders to distinguish himself in the conflict. After this he was made Kaptan Pasha, or Lord High Admiral, and two years later helped seize Cyprus from the Venetians.

Here it seemed was a figure who might be taken to epitomise Berlusconi's Clash of Civilisations - "The Terrible Turk" incarnate- until I read that Kilic Ali was in fact himself an Italian from Calabria called Ochiali who had chosen to convert to Islam. The easy assumption of some essential conflict

between two very different civilisations became a little more nuanced still when I read that the complex was constructed by another Christian convert -the great architect Sinan -and that the mosque he built was an almost perfect miniature of the Byzantine cathedral of Holy Wisdom, Hagia Sophia.

Nor was this a unique case. At the same time as Kilic Ali Pasha was the Ottoman High Admiral, one of the most powerful Ottoman viziers was the eunuch Hasan Aga, formerly known as Samson Rowlie from Great Yarmouth; at the same time in Algeria the "Moorish Kings Executioner" turned out to be a former butcher from Exeter called 'Absalom' (Abd-es-Salaam). There was also the Ottoman general known as 'Ingliz Mustapha': in fact a Scottish Campbell who had embraced Islam and joined the Janissaries.

I think I first realised the historical relationship between Christianity and Islam in 1994 when I set off on a six month journey around the Middle East following in the footsteps of a sixth century Byzantine monk named John Moschos. Moschos had travelled around the monasteries of the eastern Mediterranean in the years immediately before the rise of Islam. To my surprise, despite all the changes that have taken place across the Middle East in the last one thousand five hundred years, and thanks largely to the often forgotten tolerance of Islam to its Christian subjects, a surprising number of the monasteries visited by Moschos in the 570's still, just, survived. One of the reasons I wanted to make the journey is that in many places, this ancient Christian way of life is now threatened with extinction. In Palestine for example, Greek Orthodox monasteries built to hold two thousand monks often now contain only one single monk or nun. As Islam and Christianity are usually viewed as rival and even adversarial religions, I had expected on my journey to encounter a record a long succession of conflicts, and certainly there were a few places where this was the case. But to my surprise what I saw was very much more intimate relationship between the two religions. For it is only when you travel in remote rural places in Christianity's Eastern homelands do you realise how closely the two religions are really connected, Islam growing directly out of what was then an almost entirely Christian environment, and to this day, embodying many aspects and practices of the early Christian world now lost in Christianity's modern Western based incarnation.

When the early Byzantines were first confronted by the Prophet's armies, they assumed that Islam was merely a variant form of Christianity, and in some ways they were not so far wrong: Islam of course accepts much of the Old and New Testaments, obeys the Mosaic laws about circumcision and ablutions, and venerates both Jesus and the ancient Jewish prophets. The way the very first Muslims acted towards Christians and particularly towards Christian holy men, is very significant in this respect. When the Prophet's successor Abu Bakr stood on the borders of Syria he gave very specific instructions to his soldiers: "In the desert" he said, "you will find people who have secluded themselves in cells; let them alone, for they have secluded themselves for the sake of God."

Likewise, when his successor Umar went to Syria, he actually stayed with the Bishop of Ayla and went out of his way to meet the Christian Holy Men in the town. For many years Muslims and Christians used to pray side by side in the great churches of the Middle Eastern cities: in Damascus, for example, the great basilica of St John was used for worship by both Christians and Muslims; only fifty years later were Christians obliged to pray elsewhere and the building formally converted into what is now known as the great Umayyad mosque. Indeed, the greatest and most subtle theologian of the early church, St. John Damascene, was convinced that Islam was at root not a new

religion, but instead a variation on a Judeo-Christian form. This perception is particularly remarkable as St. John had grown up in the Ummayyad Arab court of Damascus -the hub of the young Islamic world -where his father was chancellor, and he was an intimate boyhood friend of the future Caliph al- Yazid; the two boys drinking bouts in the streets of Damascus were the subject of much horrified gossip in the streets of the new Islamic capital. Later, in his old age, John took the habit at the desert monastery of Mar Saba where he began work on his great masterpiece, a refutation of heresies entitled the Fount of Knowledge.

The book contains an extremely precise and detailed critique of Islam, the first ever written by a Christian, which, intriguingly, John regarded as a form of Christianity and closely related to the heterodox Christian doctrines of Arianism and Nestorianism: after all these doctrines, like Islam, took as their starting point a similar position: that God could not become fully human without somehow compromising his divinity.

This was a kinship that both the Muslims and the Nestorians were aware of. In 649 the Nestorian patriarch wrote: "These Arabs fight not against our Christian religion; nay, rather they defend our faith, they revere our priests and saints, and they make gifts to our churches and monasteries. This tradition continued and led to many surprising anomalies: Saladin's private secretary and the head of his War Office were both Coptic Christians, as were the Egyptian commanders who defeated the Seventh Crusade in 1250. Throughout the Middle Ages there were few if any conversions by the Sword, a myth much propagated in anti-Islamic literature, and recently expounded on at length by Paul Johnson in an incredibly ignorant and inaccurate article in that flag waver of the new bigoted Islamophobia, The Spectator .

Certainly if a monk from sixth century Byzantium were to come back today it is probable that he would find much more that was familiar in the practices and beliefs of a modern Muslim Sufi than he would with, say, a contemporary American Evangelical. Yet this simple truth has been lost by our tendency to think of Christianity as a thoroughly Western religion rather than the Oriental faith which by origin it actually is.

Moreover the modern tendency to demonise Islam in the West - and we have seen a great deal of that recently, has led to an atmosphere where few in either camp are aware of, or indeed wish to be aware of, the profound kinship of Christianity and Islam.

Perhaps no more branch of Islam shows so Christian influence as Islamic mysticism or Sufism. For Sufism with its Holy Men and visions, healings and miracles, its affinity with the desert and its emphasis on the mortification of the flesh and the individual's personal search for union with God, has always borne remarkable similarities to the more mystical strands of Eastern Christianity, and many Muslim saints -such as the great Mevlana Rumi -worked to reconcile the two religions. Indeed the very word Sufi seems to indicate a link with Christianity. For sur means wool which was the characteristic clothing material of Eastern Christian monks which was taken over by the early Mystics of Islam. Other styles of dress adopted by the Sufis are also anticipated in pre-Islamic Christianity: the patchwork frock made from rags, and the use of the colour of mourning, black for the Christians, dark blue for the Muslims. Through punishing the flesh and spiritual exercises both groups of ascetics promised their followers that they would loosen their ties with the world, purge their souls of worries and distractions and move towards direct and personal experience with God.

The West sometimes like to think of itself as the home of freedom of thought and liberty of worship, and to forget how, as recently as the seventeenth century, Huguenot exiles escaping religious persecution in Europe would write admiringly of the policy of religious tolerance practised across the Islamic world: as M de la Motraye put it, 'there is no country on earth where the exercise of all Religions is more free and less subject to being troubled, than in Turkey'. The same broad tolerance that had given homes to the hundreds of thousands of penniless Jews expelled by the bigoted Catholic kings from Spain and Portugal, protected the Eastern Christians in their ancient homelands- despite the Crusades and the almost continual hostility of the Christian West. Only in the twentieth century has that tolerance been replaced by a new hardening in Islamic attitudes; and only recently has the syncretism and pluralism of the Middle Ages become a precious rarity.

I have been thinking of Seidnaya a lot since the atrocity at the World Trade Centre last month. Since then we have seen the right-wing 'Qualities' and the tabloids forming an unholy alliance united in virulent Islamophobia, as a hundred instant experts in Islam have popped up to offer their views on a religion few seem ever to have encountered in person. Conrad Black's Spectator and Daily and Sunday Telegraphs have been the cheerleader of this tendency, printing a whole series of leaders and comment pieces denouncing Islam.

So we have seen Patrick Sookhdeo explain to Daily Telegraph readers that Islam is, uniquely, a "religion that sanctions all forms of violence" (which apart from anything else makes one wonder if Mr Sookhdeo has ever read the Old Testament: there are innumerable incredibly bloody passages in the Old testament, for example that in Exodus chapter 23 vs. 23-24 "I will send my terror in front of you... you shall utterly demolish them and break their pillars in pieces, "). In the same paper, Daniel Johnson has meanwhile been telling us that Islamic Fundamentalists "dream of a world purged of unbelievers", while in the Times Michael Gove has been writing pieces almost every day warning of the danger from those fanatical Muslim hordes: "They are already there in their thousands. And they are not going to respect weakness any more than Lenin did."

After the scale of horror of the atrocity in New York perhaps this sort of thing is inevitable; but it doesn't alter the fact that the image these writers are projecting of Islam is a ludicrously unbalanced, inaccurate and a one-sided one. Moreover, such prejudices against Muslims and the spread of idiotic stereotypes of Muslim behaviour and beliefs have been developing at a frightening rate during the last decade, something the horrific assault on the World Trade Centre can only exacerbate. Indeed anti-Muslim racism now seems in many ways to be replacing anti-Semitism as the principal Western expression of bigotry against 'the other'.

The horrific massacre of eight thousand unarmed Muslims at Strebrenitza never led to a stream of pieces about the violence and repressive tendencies of Christianity. Equally the extraordinary size and diversity of the Islamic world should caution against lazy notions of a united, aggressive, repressive Islam acting in concert against "the Judeo-Christian West". Islam is of course no more cohesive than Christendom: neither is it a single, rational, antagonistic force. Christians in Britain are different from the Swedes, the Serbs and the fundamentalist evangelicals of the American Mid-West; so the Indonesians are totally different from the Mauritanians, and the Hezbollah headbangers of Lebanon. There is no

such thing as 'the Muslim mind' -anti-democratic, terrorist, primaeval in its behaviour, or however else it is portrayed -any more than one can talk usefully of the rational, peace-loving Christian mind. The Islamic world, for better or worse, is much like anywhere else in the developing world.

Civilisation is, of course, neither western nor eastern but flourishes in its most refined, scholarly, technologically sophisticated and sublime form as a result of east-west encounters, and religious and ethnic tolerance as was the case in Islamic Spain and Sicily, and Ottoman Istanbul.

The essential kinship between the different religions of the book maybe forgotten now in the West but is something Muslim writers have been aware of for centuries. The thirteenth century Sufi Jalal- ud Din Rumi, was perhaps the greatest of all the mystical writers of Islam, and lived in Konya in Eastern Anatolia, at a time when its population was almost equally divided between Muslims, Christians and Jews. When he was asked about the relationship between these three apparently incompatible religions, he replied with the following story, which I will leave you with as a final thought:

"Once upon a time, in a far distant country somewhere north of Afghanistan, there was a city inhabited entirely by the blind. One day the news came that an elephant was passing outside the walls of the city.

"The Citizens called a meeting and decided to send a delegation of three men outside the gates so that they could report back what an elephant was. In due course the three men left the town and stumbled forwards until they eventually found the elephant. The three reached out, felt the animal with their hands, then they all headed back to town as quickly as they could to report what they had felt.

"The first man said: " An elephant is a marvellous creature! It is like a vast snake, but it can stand vertically upright in the air!" The second man was indignant at hearing this: "What nonsense! " he said. "This man is misleading you. I felt the elephant and what it most resembles is a pillar. It is firm and solid and however hard you push against it you could never knock it over. " The third man shook his head and said: "Both these men are liars! I felt the elephant and it resembles a broad fan. It is wide and flat and leathery and when you shake it wobbles around like the sail of a dhow." All three men stuck by their stories and for the rest of their lives refused to speak to each other. Each professed that they and only they knew the whole truth.

"Now of course all three of the blind men had a measure of insight. The first man felt the trunk of the elephant, the second the leg, the third the ear. All had been granted part of the truth, but not one of them had begun to grasp the totality or the greatness of the beast they had encountered. If only they had listened to one another and meditated on the different facets of the elephant, they might have grasped the true nature of the beast. But they were too proud and instead preferred to keep to their own half-truths.

"So it is with us. We see the Almighty one way, the Jews have a slightly different conception, and the Christians have a third. To us, all our different visions are irreconcilable. But what we forget is that before God we are like blind men stumbling around in total darkness..."

Edited text of a talk given at Kensington Town Hall on 30 October 2001.