

kind of lifestyle Solomon enjoyed. At most he can be compared to one of the patriarchs of the Old Testament before the later teachings of Moses and the prophets in the Bible enlightened consciences and tamed passions.

The Moslem finds himself in a framework that binds him from birth to death. Even the copulative act must be performed while invoking the name of Allah. His last act before death must be an affirmation of faith in one God, while raising one finger. Each day is marked by five prayers which come to a climax each Friday during communal prayers. Apostasy is punishable by death. A Christian cannot become the head of a Moslem state or teach Arabic. Non-Moslems are marginalized: even if he is of Arabic origin he is nothing more than a second class citizen. The gospel links love of God and neighbour. The Q'ran proclaims the rights of God over creatures.

### Sufism

The most remarkable spiritual dimensions of Islam have come through Sufism, the mystical aspect of Islam. Islam split very early into three great sects: Sunnism, Shi'ism and Kharedjism. Both the Sunnites and Kharedjites no longer have Caliphs as leaders and the Imam of the Shi'ites is in hiding. A quote from the "Book of Love" of Sufism goes: "A sage will ask : 'Are you a lover of God?', and he answers "No, I am not a lover, I am loved". Considering this quotation, it is clear Islam has "glimpses of truth" to share.

### Official Catholic teaching on Islam

It is clear that relations between Islam and Christianity are very complex. The ground for those committed to sowing the seed of the gospel to Moslems is very rocky. What then should the attitude be of Catholic Christians who wish to enter into dialogue with Moslems?

St Justin Martyr (c100 – 165AD) ascribed many truths in the non-Christian religions to the Word of God, who enlightens every man, a concept found in the gospel of St John. This has been the view of the

Catholic Church down the centuries, rather than the view of some that non-Christian religions were simply the work of Satan.

"*Nostra Aetate*", the official document of the Second Vatican Council on non-Christian religions should be our guide. In paragraph 3 we read "*They (Moslems) await the day of judgement when God will give each man his due after raising him up. Consequently, they prize the moral life, and give worship to God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting. ... Although in the course of centuries, many hostilities have arisen between Moslems and Christians, all are to forget the past and strive for mutual understanding, foster social justice, moral values, peace and freedom.*"

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Pamphlet 053

# A Catholic Perspective on Islam

## A world religion

**Today Islam, the religion founded by Mohamed (c570-629) in Arabia is very much in the news.** The word "Islam" means "submission" (to Allah). An adherent is known as a Moslem (or Muslim). It is one of the fastest growing religions in the world with approximately 1 billion adherents, as against Christianity's 1.6 billion, of whom 1 billion 70 million are Catholics.

## Dialogue

The Catholic Church encourages dialogue with Moslems, especially in humanitarian areas which all the great religions share. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) "*rejects nothing which is true and holy in the non-Christian religions, looks upon them with sincere respect*" and recognises in them "*glimpses of truth*" (*Nostra Aetate*, 2).

"*Redemptoris Missio*" (*On the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate, December 12, 1990, Pope John Paul II*) insists on the necessity to proclaim, in such dialogue, Jesus Christ as the only Way, Truth and the Life (Jn 14:6), in whom alone mankind can find salvation and the fullness of faith. It notes fully the difficulties in dialogue with Islam. Pope John Paul II, in his exhortation "*Ecclesia in Africa*", while encouraging dialogue, also recognises how difficult it is, especially with fundamentalist Islam, where there is a clear lack of reciprocity.

## The verse of the sabre

In the early centuries there was relative peace between Moslems and Christians in Arabia who were initially seen as "*people of the book*". However, a later verse of the Q'ran (Sura 9:29), the "*verse of the sabre*", prescribes war against Christians.

Moslems believe that their holy book, the Q'ran, was given directly to Mohamed by God. It is divided into 114 chapters or "Suras". Mohamed's followers wrote the Q'ran shortly after his death. Traditions not contained in the Q'ran are known as the Hadith. Allah is unknowable, indivisible and inscrutable. Any notion of the Blessed Trinity is strongly rejected by Islam as is the Christian understanding of knowing God as "Father". The relationship between God and the believer is a "master/slave relationship". They believe that Mohamed is the last and greatest of the prophets. He was sent to the entire world while Jesus is only a prophet sent to Israel. Islam rejects the Bible as having been "tampered with" by the Jews and Christians, and is "unreliable and inaccurate".

Although the sabre is proudly displayed on the flag of Saudi Arabia where Islam was founded, it proclaims itself as a religion of peace.

### Islam and Christianity

Islam has a creed consisting of six basic beliefs including an unofficial belief in Jihad ("Holy War"), in regard to the infidels (unbelievers), which includes Jews and Christians.

Moslems consider themselves much more tolerant than Christians, remembering the forced expulsions of Jews and Moslems from Spain. The fact that all non-Moslem religion is forbidden in Saudi Arabia is not considered conflicting with the Islamic proclamation of tolerance for others. They are oblivious to the fact that this "tolerance" is daily ignored and contradicted by Moslem societies which leave no freedom for the consciences of other peoples.

Islam believes that a book, known as "Gospel" (sic) was delivered by Jesus to the first Christians but was lost. The New Testament is seen as an inaccurate version of this original. Islam believes that what the Q'ran says is much more accurate than what the Old and New Testament record. Gen 22:10 has Isaac, not Ishmael (as in the Q'ran) as the one to

be sacrificed. Islam has regard for the Blessed Virgin Mary and Jesus. However, the Q'ran says that "*Jesus was no more than an apostle of God, the son of Mary, born from the dust*" (Sura 19:92). According to the Q'ran, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary in the form of a man. Gabriel was "*the Holy Spirit*" (sic) through whose union with Mary Jesus was conceived. Mary went into the wilderness in the east and gave birth to Jesus under a palm tree, laden with fruit. After giving birth, Mary, hungry and exhausted, shook the tree and ate the fruit that fell to the ground. The Christian "*infancy narratives*" in St Luke's gospel give a different story, which, according to Christian tradition, was narrated by Mary herself to the evangelist, Luke. Two such differing narratives cannot both be true.

In the Q'ran there is no Joseph. It also states in regard to the death of Jesus: "*They neither killed nor crucified him: it had only the appearance of it*" (Sura 4:157). The Q'ran also confuses Miriam, the sister of Moses, and the Virgin Mary. Whereas Christianity teaches salvation by grace, Moslems believe that their own works, alone, will save them: "*Those whose balances shall be heavy, shall be blest*" (Sura 13:102, 140). Catholic Christianity teaches a salvation by grace and "*faith in Jesus Christ manifested in 'graced' works of love*" (Gal 5:6). Christians see saving oneself by one's own efforts as a heresy, known as Pelagianism, which was condemned by the Church centuries ago.

The Q'ran's testimony of Jesus and Mary was recorded 600 years after the events, while the New Testament conveys eyewitness or firsthand testimony of the life and ministry of Jesus.

Islam maintains that Judaism "*applies to humanity in its childhood*", while Christianity talks to "*adolescent humanity*", naively exalting "good feelings of love and forgiveness". Islam inserts itself into social life by application of the "law".

In fact, the only "*closeness*" between Christianity and Islam, let it be said, is that they both know the names of certain biblical personages. Structurally, Islam remains closed to Christianity. All these superficial resemblances are integrated in Islam into a structure

that blocks all acceptance of Jesus as the Son of God and the Savior of mankind. The Q'ran actually states: "*Those who say that God is the Messiah are ungodly*" (Sura 5:1). The doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation are rejected. The Q'ran misinterprets the purpose for which Jesus gave his life and death.

### Islam: a religion of law

A Christian truly lives the life of an adopted child of God. To the Moslem, Jesus is nothing but a prophet. The Church and the life of grace are totally unintelligible to the Moslem.

From the Christian point of view, the legalism of Islam seems as deserving of condemnation as that of the Scribes of Jesus' time in their reading of the law. A woman may not pray during her monthly periods. Food is either pure or impure. For the Christian, Islam seems to be striving to bring back humanity to the period that the Sermon on the Mount has left behind. The Moslem sees everything in terms of the parameters of the law. It is very difficult for him to understand that Christianity is an encounter with the living Christ, in which he assumes freely his responsibilities under God empowered by grace. Islam is a system retrogressing back to the period left behind by the gospel.

Yet Islam believes it has delivered women from the condition of inferiority where she was kept before in Arabia. But consider the teaching of the Q'ran on polygamy (Q'ran 4:3), and the repudiation of the wife in divorce at the sole whim of her husband (Q'ran 2, 226, 232).

The Sermon on the Mount is many times contradicted by the practices and life of Mohamed. As military chief he planned his war expeditions. As politician he eliminated his adversaries by all sorts of doubtful methods, including assassination. Even collective massacre (against the Jews of Messina) was used by Mohamed as a means of spreading Islam.

Mohamed, who initially had a harem lived the