

# HOW CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER

## by Rev. Keith E. Small

### I. Introduction

The title of this lecture is 'How Christians and Muslims Understand Each Other.' In the 17 years I have lived in Britain, I have been very impressed by how much hard and good work has gone into increasing understanding between different faith communities. This has been through Religious Education in our schools, through various government initiatives, through council and community initiatives, through local members of the various faith communities and their churches, mosques, awareness events like tonight's, and especially through personal relationships. During the time I have lived in Britain, and most of that in this local area, I have seen an increase in mutual understanding, and I am very grateful to God for it, and grateful to all of the many people involved.

With that in mind, though, recent events remind us there is still much to be done. Though there is increased understanding, we would all agree there is still too much *mis*-understanding. Tonight, I want to address some issues that are still too often marked more by misunderstanding than understanding.

This talk is mainly addressed to Christians and Muslims, but others are quite welcome to listen in and contribute. In the West, people of all faith commitments have the opportunity to talk to and listen to each other as never before. Let us not waste this opportunity. Let us combine a search for knowledge about each other with sympathy and respect. Let us seek to understand our similarities and differences with clarity, fairness, and without inaccurate stereotypes.

This will be a short attempt to address some of the major misunderstandings between Muslims and Christians about each other and each other's religions. I would like to address three that Christians often have, and three that I have found Muslims often have. Please consider this as a beginning step from which other misunderstandings can then be addressed.

### II. Christian misunderstandings about Islam

These are things those of us who are Christians need to take to heart.

- A. Many Christians wrongly see all Muslims as potential extremists, terrorists, or at least as intolerant. There is a tendency to fear all Muslims are religious fanatics instead of regarding them as normal, religious people. I think there are at least two main reasons for this.
  1. Many Christians are influenced by media coverage which often emphasizes violent fundamentalism. They don't realize that they are being given an incomplete picture. There is a *variety* within Islam in that there are peaceful groups as well as violent ones, spiritually motivated groups as well as politically motivated ones. And *all* of these groups look to the Qur'an and the example of Muhammad for their guidance and justification.

2. Also, many Christians don't understand the degree of conviction that Muslims have about their faith. Muslims are taught that they have received the final religion that supersedes all others and corrects all others where they may have gone astray. With this they believe that Muhammad is the final and most authoritative prophet sent to mankind. The Qur'an says in Surah 61:9, As-Saff, or "The Ranks", "***He it is Who has sent His messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, that He may make it victorious over all religions, even though the idolaters hate it.***" (Hilali & Khan, p. 1101). From this basis, many Muslims believe they have received a divine mandate to spread their religion to the entire world and invite others to join it. Though at times this may seem intolerant, I have found it is often an expression of conviction combined with a compassionate desire so that others can know what Muslims believe is the truth. It is the same kind of conviction that we as Christians feel because of Jesus' absolute statements, like in John 14:6, "***Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through Me.'***" The concern of Muslims for our eternal destiny is the same kind of concern that we Christians have toward non-Christians, that they might find what we regard as the truth found in Christ and that they may be saved from their sins.

Though Christians and Muslims disagree about who has brought absolute truth, we can understand and sympathize with the conviction and compassion that motivates our beliefs. Understanding the variety in Islam and the strength of the convictions of Muslims can help us overcome unfair generalizations like regarding all Muslims as being potential extremists.

- B. Many Christians don't understand Muhammad's place in Islam, and it leads them to two kinds of misconception concerning Muhammad.
  1. Often Christians can think that Muhammad holds the same general place in Islam that Jesus holds in Christianity. They don't realize that Muslims don't see Islam as "Mohammed's" religion, that is, a religion that Muhammad began. Muslims believe Islam is the basic religion that all prophets proclaimed, Muhammad happening to be the last prophet. For us, the misconception is over-estimating the importance of Muhammad to Muslims in the religion of Islam, almost believing that Muslims worship him.
  2. Christians can also underestimate what Muhammad means to Muslims. This is seen in that many don't understand the attitude toward Muhammad that was expressed in the Danish cartoons affair. While Muslims don't worship Muhammad, Christians often don't understand the place of affection and devotion he does have so that they understand the hurt defaming remarks cause. Muslims see Muhammad as the last and greatest of the prophets and so accord him the greatest amount of respect that they give to any man. Many Muslims also think that Muhammad will intercede for them on the Day of Judgment so they want to publicly express their loyalty to him. It is also against Islamic law to criticize Muhammad, so Muslims have a difficult time when others do it. The hurt Muslims feel

when Muhammad is criticized is like the hurt Christians feel when they hear Jesus insulted or given less than what they believe is his proper honor. To Christians, to insult Jesus or to call him something less than the deity He claims for Himself in the Bible is blasphemy, and we feel tremendous hurt and offense at such things.

Christians need to understand the emotions involved in others' beliefs and be sensitive to how Muslims view Muhammad.

- C. Many Christians have at least three misconceptions about the roles of politics and religion in Islam.
1. Christians can tend to believe that Islam was *exclusively* spread by the sword. They are often ignorant of world history that shows that some of Islam's spread was the result of traders and Muslim Sufi missionaries. This was especially true for some of Islam's spread in parts of Africa and South-east Asia. It is also true of some of Islam's spread in the West today. Western Christians tend to know more about the wars with Islam in the Middle East, Central Asia, around the Mediterranean and in Europe.
  2. Also, many Christians are ignorant of the political nature of Islam so they don't expect it to be involved in politics today. Throughout history Islam has never hesitated to use political means to help spread and enforce Islam since Muslims believe the religion of Islam is meant to embrace the whole of life. Christians often don't realize that the Qur'an and Islamic law embrace not only personal religion but family law, civil law, criminal law, international relations, and warfare. In Christian terms, it does look to set up a sort of "God's Kingdom" in this world as well as being concerned with the next.
  3. Christians also forget that for much of the history of Christianity, the view was held that the Church was to be intimately involved in politics. For many centuries the Church regarded the sword of political authority as a necessary and proper support for its position. Only in recent centuries has this expectation been rightly overturned and modified.

Overall, Christians need to realize that Muslims do not regard the formal separation of religion and state as proper.

These are just some of many areas where Christians need to become better informed concerning Islam.

### **III. Muslims' misunderstandings about Christianity**

Please accept this as an outsider's view. These are misunderstandings that as a Christian I have encountered personally, many of them in this very town.

- C. Many Muslims view all Westerners as Christians for at least three reasons.

1. I think that since culture and religion are so intertwined in Islam, some Muslims have a hard time realizing that all Westerners are *not* Christians. The West has a Christian religious heritage, but many people in our society have left that heritage to pursue a more secular course. Religion in the West has been moved out of much of public life and is considered to be a mostly private affair. Crime, immorality, drug abuse, and drunkenness are not things that Christianity promotes or allows. It is adamantly opposed to them for the sins that they are in themselves, and for the hurt and tragedy they foster. The people who claim to be Christian and yet are involved in these sins are doing them against God in spite of Christianity and the Bible, not because Christianity teaches them or permits them to do these things.
  
  2. Many Muslims have a hard time understanding that *all* countries in the West do not allow the Church or any religion to have dominant political power. Muslims can tend to confuse Jesus with Muhammad and think that He left a law and political agenda similar to Muhammad's. Jesus didn't do these things. The law He left is the Law of love summed up by what is called the Golden Rule: *"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."* (Matt. 7:12, NIV). It is this teaching, which still operates to a great degree in the West, that is behind people being allowed freedom of speech, even to the degree where Muhammad is insulted in the Danish cartoons, and Jesus is degraded in The Last Temptation of Christ. This also contributes to why the West views it as wrong for even blasphemers to be injured or killed. Christians are also taught to love their enemies and pray for their repentance.
  
  3. Also, Muslims tend to misunderstand that, according to the Bible, becoming a Christian is primarily a personal decision, and is only secondarily a cultural or family identity. No one is born a Christian. Everyone must decide for themselves whether or not they will trust in Jesus' death for them on the cross for the forgiveness of their sins. Jesus Himself emphasized this where He said, *"For God so loved the world that he gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* (John 3:16) A culture becomes "Christian" only secondarily after many people choose Christ and obey His teachings, and it affects the way they live.
- B. Many Muslims assume that the Bible has been corrupted, that is, that its content and meaning have been intentionally and radically changed at some point in its history.

A claim of this magnitude concerning anyone's holy book is of such importance that it should not be treated lightly but should be investigated with extreme care and objectivity. Christians and Muslims both claim that their holy books contain the truth that will lead a person to eternal life. Yet they disagree *fundamentally* with each other on how this is accomplished. A

choice between the books must be made. Here are three issues that are commonly misunderstood by Muslims concerning the Bible:

1. The existence of so many different translations of the Bible means that there are many different Bibles. This is wrong. There is only one basic Bible, in the original languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. There are many different translations of this one basic book because of the nature of language. Language changes, so translations need to reflect these changes. Language is also rich in meaning. Additional translations bring out nuances that might be missing in others. The basic meaning in all these translations is the same. This situation is the same as is found with English, German, Persian, Malaysian, Turkish and Urdu translations of the Qur'an. They are different translations of the same book.<sup>1</sup>
2. It is often remarked concerning the Bible that since some variations exist in the old manuscripts that the text must be corrupt. I have found that most Muslims do not realize that for their own book, the Qur'an, there is a similar situation. In the most reliable Islamic traditions it is recorded that many of the companions of Muhammad had collections of the Qur'an that differed from each other. Many of these differences have been preserved. The Qur'an collections differed in many respects, for example, the number and order of Surahs, the spelling of words, and the use of different words in the exact same contexts. If one examines these variations fairly, they will realize that the situations for the Bible and the Qur'an are very similar. These variations in detail don't affect the general reliability of the text. There are small areas that are in doubt as to the exact reading, but none of the variant readings affect the major doctrines in Islam or Christianity. The *significant* difference between the two books is in their messages, not their textual histories. It is false to believe that one has been corrupted beyond reliability in the transmission of its text while the other has not.
3. Also, Muslims are often ignorant of the history of the transmission of the Bible that bears this out. The Hebrew Bible has been the Holy Scriptures of the Jews since before Jesus, and they still are to this day. The books of the New Testament have been the Holy Scriptures for the Christians, together with the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), since the days of the Apostles of Jesus. In the five centuries preceding Muhammad this same basic Bible that we have today was the Scripture of the Christians. Manuscripts that survive from the early centuries demonstrate that the content and meaning were not changed either before Muhammad or after.

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<sup>1</sup> Concerning the RC, Orthodox and Coptic Bibles, the core books are the same. Also, with the ones that are added, there is a recognition that they do not stand on the same level as the core books for historical accuracy and importance for teaching. They have a broader latitude as to what is put between the two covers allowing books to stand alongside more properly inspired books. An Islamic parallel would be if there were a Shi'ite Qur'an in use containing the changes and additional materials Shi'ites believe were in Ali's collection of the Qur'an; or if there were Qur'an's in use containing the additional material attributed to Ubayy ibn Ka'b and other companions in the hadith; or if there were a shorter version of the Qur'an with Ibn Mas'ud's 111 Surahs. The variety of contents for the Bibles in Christendom is testimony to the fact that they have not been formally and officially edited to the degree of the Qur'an.

- C. Many Muslims believe Christians have made Jesus out to be God, that is, that they have elevated a man to deity.

All that Christians believe about Jesus being God comes from Jesus' own words and actions in the Gospels, and the testimony of Jesus' closest disciples as preserved in the New Testament. Christians have not made Jesus out to be God. We have only accepted what Jesus Christ revealed about Himself. Christians are as sensitive to blasphemy as any Jew or Muslim. We have only accepted Jesus as God by examining the evidence left by Jesus Himself that is recorded in the Gospels of the New Testament. And we consider that this evidence has proven itself to be more historically accurate and reliable than any later sources concerning the life of Jesus.

These are some of many areas where I have found Muslims could be better informed.

#### **IV Conclusion**

As I said at the beginning, these are just a few of the misunderstandings between Muslims and Christians. If you feel I have not been fair, or that I have left out any of greater importance than these, please say so and help me to learn.

My burden is that we discuss our faiths fairly, clearly, and with respect and sympathy. We would all agree that God is to be served with our entire lives and hearts. We must come to a place where we can accept our differences and similarities with understanding and sympathy, yet without compromising our convictions. Let us approach each other sincerely and seek to correct our mutual misunderstandings.

Thank you for allowing me to address you. May God bless you as you seek Him and as you seek the truth.

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