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HUFF POST RELIGION

The Meaning of Islam

A few years back, long before 9/11, one of our Religious Studies majors told me that she had taken my course to learn *why* she should hate Islam. As a normal young American growing up on Long Island, she had no doubt that she *should* hate Islam, but she still wanted to know what was so bad about it.

There are many historical, political, and cultural reasons for the negative stereotypes of Islam that permeate American society. One of the more obvious is that people confuse religion and ideology.

Scholars often distinguish between "Islam," meaning the religion as taught and practiced over the centuries, and "Islamism," meaning the various ideologies that have appeared over the past century claiming to speak on its behalf. As one of these scholars put it, "An ideology is a clear blueprint that requires only mechanical implementation. ... It offers easy answers to the most difficult and fundamental questions. ... [It] renders redundant the human processes of constantly thinking, evaluating, facing hard choices, and balancing" (Farhang Rajaee, *Islamism and Modernism*, p. 4).

For those open to the idea that "Islamism" in no way represents the mainstream teachings and practices of the Islamic tradition, it is worth reviewing what the word *islām*, "submission" or "surrender," means in the Quran.

As noted in my previous post, one of the Quranic meanings of this word is the universal obedience of all things to the natural laws that govern the universe. These laws make free choice impossible. Everything fits into its own niche and does exactly what God wants it to do. All things are "submitted" by definition. Human beings, however, are also free by definition. In effect, part of their compulsory submission, their "predestination" if you prefer, is that they must face up to their own freedom.

The Quran and other scriptures assume that people are free enough to make a difference in their lives. In the Quranic view, God sent prophets to every people in order to tell them how to take advantage of their freedom so as to ensure a congenial posthumous becoming. This is the second Quranic meaning of *islām*: voluntary submission to God's guidance as given to the prophets (*e.g.*, Abraham, Moses, Jesus). This, I would argue, is by far the most common meaning of the word in the Quran itself.

The third Quranic meaning of *islām* is the *practices* designated by the Quran as a means to follow prophetic guidance. This is *islām* in the narrowest sense of the term, generally defined as observance of God's commandments. These are summarized as "the Five Pillars": public acknowledgment of God's unity and Muhammad's prophecy, praying the daily prayers, fasting during the month of Ramadan, paying the alms tax, and making the pilgrimage to Mecca. Each pillar is a specific ritual act, similar to ritual acts found in other religions, but unique in detail.

None of these three meanings of the word *islām* corresponds to what the Quran sometimes calls "the religion," meaning the specific guidance provided by itself and Muhammad. One can argue that the Quran does not in fact use the word *islām* as the proper name of the religion, though this usage certainly became established over the centuries.

"The religion" as described by the Quran addresses three universal concerns: practice, understanding, and virtue. Or: doing the right thing, seeing things in perspective, and participating in God's beauty and goodness. Or: conforming to the Ultimate Reality in body, mind, and heart. Or: law, understanding, and love. Or: ritual, wisdom, and compassion.

Islamic texts typically list these three concerns in this order -- from the most external to the most internal -- because that is the way people develop. First the body appears, then awareness and understanding, and finally, God willing, human goodness.

A child can be taught what to do, but it takes a while before the child understands why it is the right thing to do. The stance of the parent -- "because I said so" -- may be enough to begin with, but part of growing up is to learn how to make your own choices. Both understanding and spiritual maturity are individual tasks. No one can understand for you, and no one can love for you.

Religion based on authority -- the pronouncements of parents, priests, rabbis, and mullas -- may seem to be the rule, but most people sense that it is not enough. Blind obedience is religion for Sunday school, not life.

As children develop, they learn that they are not the center of the universe. Education has always been as much about enculturation as anything else. There used to be a common notion that the ultimate aim of education is to help people achieve the status of a true human being. If you can act correctly and really understand the way things are, you may be able to develop

love for God and sympathy and compassion for others.

These three dimensions of universal concern -- activity, understanding, and love -- are the topics of the Quran. It is true that Islam is commonly represented as a religion of law, but this is based on a superficial reading. Any broad historical perspective will show that law itself, the *shariah*, has always played a subsidiary role in the Muslim understanding of the text. The rules, after all, are kindergarten stuff. The general position has been that people should learn enough law to perform the rituals, but they should leave the details to the lawyers. Doing the right things is important, but it is far more important to grow up in mind and heart and to develop wisdom and compassion. "How easy to become a mulla," as the Persian proverb has it, "but how difficult to become human!"

During the first three centuries after Muhammad, the three dimensions of the religion coalesced into distinct fields of scholarly endeavor, one of which was law. Lawyers did come to play a prominent role in Muslim society, not least because any society is built on law, but lawyers had nothing to say about the wisdom and love that underlie both the worldview and the ethos of Islam. These were explained and elaborated upon by thinkers, sages, saints, and poets.

Islamic society generally recognized that lawyers tended to be a conniving bunch, always ready to compromise with the powers that be in order to enhance their prestige and influence. Criticism of their worldliness has been a common theme throughout Islamic history. When the religion of Islam in its full breadth and depth is reduced to law and put into the service of ideology, and when the law is then enforced by technological means undreamed of by the despots of old, the *shariah* becomes a powerful tool for social and political manipulation.

The current prominence of law and politics in public discussion of Islam should not blind us to the fact that the *shariah* remains the most external and rudimentary dimension of the religion. If it is employed as an ideological tool, "a clear blueprint that requires only mechanical implementation," it quickly turns into coercion. If it is combined with understanding, love, and compassion, it can and still does provide a stable ritual and social environment for spiritual growth.

For a description of the Islamic tradition in terms of its three dimensions, see Murata and Chittick, The Vision of Islam.