
UNDERSTANDING ISLAM: AN INTRODUCTION

The Prophet and his children

DAVID BURRELL & PATRICK D. GAFFNEY

The students who take our courses in classical or contemporary Islam invariably give as their reason for enrolling: "I know nothing about Islam yet feel that I should. It seems to be so important today." Perhaps that is also why we have a disproportionate number of Government and International Studies majors. Through no fault of their own, our students share the general cultural deprivation of American suburban dwellers, yet some of them have been made aware of that fact, often through overseas programs which have opened their horizons to embrace larger worlds. American Christians usually come to know Jews in their neighborhoods and their schools, but friendship or even acquaintance with Muslims is harder to come by.

Moreover, echoes of the conflict in the state of Israel and the occupied territories have long been picked up in a milieu like our own, which is predominantly Christian yet marginally Jewish, resulting at times in a skewed image of valiant settlers facing roaming "terrorists," the bulk of whom are Muslims. So, lamentably, the identification of "Muslim" with "fanatic" and even "terrorist" pervades our subliminal awareness. And then there is the bugbear of "fundamentalism," a term which Catholics generally employ to castigate anyone else, allowing the phrase "Muslim fundamentalist" to roll off our lips without much reflection. Finally, the direct and massive involvement of an international coalition

led by the United States in a war against one Arab state for the purported defense of others in the region only adds to the urgency of calls for a clearer and more realistic grasp of Islam.

In the face of all these obstacles, how can one start to teach about, to learn about Islam? By beginning with their revelational book, the Holy Qur'an, certainly. But it will probably help little to take a copy out of the library and begin to be inspired. We might feel a bit like the Hindu traveler in the United States who took advantage of the hotel room Bible to acquaint himself with this country's holy book, only to realize that it had very little "religion" in it! For one thing, the arrangement of the chapters or *suras* in the Muslim holy book can be daunting, for after the first (which serves them as a frequent prayer, much like the Our Father for Christians) the rest follow in a conventional order based solely on their length. (This is likewise the principle for the ordering of Paul's epistles in the New Testament.) So whoever ventures forward into the second sura which is the longest and incidentally one of the last to be revealed, may find themselves bogged down in material which seems strange, oblique, and repetitious even though it resonates with a majesty of its own. For this reason, some translators have sought to reorder the suras such as Penguin's *The Koran* by N.J. Dahood which arranges them out in a conjectured chronological sequence. While such a recasting is not the sort of thing which Muslims wish to countenance, the Qur'an itself does indicate where each sura was revealed to Muhammad, for it is part of their belief that the Prophet received God's message piecemeal, as it were, in response to specific situations.

Since it is received as God's very word, Christians are better advised to liken the Qur'an to Jesus himself (as *the Word of*

God) rather than to the Bible, where God's word is understood to be mediated through the concerns of the inspired authors. So when citing a verse of the Qur'an, it is advisable to say: "the Qur'an says . . .," and never "Muhammad says . . .," for the Prophet is but God's mouthpiece. The sayings of Muhammad himself, on the other hand, have been collected into a series of narratives, admonitions, and aphorisms known as *hadith*, which also instruct Muslims. One often finds that they refer to these as guides to action. The Qur'an itself, in all or in part, is frequently committed to memory, and favorite verses are employed, much like the Jesus-prayer in Orthodox spirituality, as mantras evoking the presence of God.

As God's very word made Arabic, translations of the Qur'an are explicitly not the Qur'an itself. Sometimes this distinction is encoded in the title such as A. J. Arberry's *The Koran Interpreted* (Oxford, 1964), M.M. Pickthall's *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (New American Library, 1953), or Ahmed Ali's *Al-Qur'an: A Commentary Translation* (Princeton, 1988). Fortunately for Christian readers, the retired Anglican bishop of Jerusalem, Kenneth Cragg, has recently translated the Qur'an and collected its key verses thematically in an edition which provides helpful reading tips: *Readings in the Qur'an* (Collins, 1988). For those desiring a more systematic immersion into these scriptures there is probably no better brief guide available than W. Montgomery Watt's revision of Richard Bell's extraordinary *Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburgh University Press, 1970).

As with Christianity, the history of the movement known as Islam may afford one a better understanding than the revelational book itself. Here readers can profit from a century of Western academic scholarship, initially European yet currently American

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as well. Among the most readable general introductions are Frederick Denny's *An Introduction to Islam* (Macmillan, 1985) and Jacques Jomier's *How to Understand Islam* (SCM, 1989). Denny is a student of comparative religions whose understanding of Islam extends as far as Indonesia, whereas Jomier is a French Dominican who has spent much of his life in Cairo and the farther reaches of Africa. Each writes clearly, Denny emitting the air of a textbook, while Jomier's style displays the learned continental flair of *haute vulgarisation*. Each orients his presentation in ways that make connections with Christian ideas and practice while both are also aware that the identification of "Muslim" with "Arab" must be overcome—for the majority of today's Muslims live outside Arab lands. Hardier readers may profit from Andras and Ruth Hamori's edition of the Hungarian-German scholar Ignaz Goldziher's classical *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law* (Princeton, 1981) where the similarities and differences between Islam and Judaism receive more attention, and the developments in spiritual life under the Sufis is nicely presented.

A masterful introduction covering this same range of basic material but from within the tradition itself can be found in the late Fuzlur Rahman's *Islam* (Second edition, University of Chicago, 1979). This work continues to serve as a *vade mecum* for intellectually inclined novices as well as a brilliant interpretative essay for veterans, Muslim and non-Muslims alike. Its author received a traditional Islamic education in his native Punjab before going on to complete doctoral studies at Oxford. He began his career in the early 1950s closely associated with the heady idealistic effort to forge a modern Muslim state in Pakistan. Later retreating from what evolved into a political vortex, he concentrated on a formidable array of scholarly pursuits, ultimately at the University of Chicago. His remarkable learning and generosity of spirit live on in his extensive writings as well as an exceptional group of appreciative former students spread out amid dozens of university faculties in the Muslim world and

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the West.

Another avenue of approach to these origins lies in the search for its historical founder which in the case of Islam is far better documented than for Christianity, although the inevitable glosses and mythologizing accretions are hardly lacking. Here two easily accessible works might aid a beginner. Tor Andrae's *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith* (Harper, 1960) offers a streamlined and sensitive capsule portrait that evidences the best virtues of old-fashioned Germanic scholarship, though the author was actually Swedish. A biography that is probably more in tune with contemporary sensibility, better informed regarding the socio-cultural context, and incorporates later findings is *Mohammed* (Vintage, 1974) by Maxine Rodinson, doyen of Semitic studies in France and still one of her most insightful observers of related current affairs.

An exploration of the Sufi movement—a heartfelt response to God's presence in the Qur'an on the part of many Muslims over the ages—might start with Annemarie Schimmel's beautifully written *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (University of North Carolina Press, 1975). Or for bolder souls who prefer to nestle immediately at the sheikh's feet, the just-published magisterial tome of William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (SUNY Press, 1989) will provide an aspiring contemplative with the closest thing to a magic carpet which is, of course, a folkloric transmutation of the Muslim prayer rug. Chittick's eloquent translation plus facing commentary of extensive portions of the works by this thirteenth-century Andalusian mystic, perhaps Islam's most influential and controversial spiritual master, offers lay and professional readers alike an unprecedented resource for the study of this genius, comparable to John of the Cross as poet and Meister Eckhart as thinker. Taken as a group, these works can introduce us to Islam and to the life and practice of our Muslim brothers and sisters in a way which is at once sympathetic and illuminating.

Passing from these canonical, devotional, and theoretical concerns to the more

actual side of Islam with its cacophonous expressions in our times, a sound acquaintance with recent historical experience in the region stands as the requisite preliminary for any serious inquiry. Just as the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution, or for that matter, Vatican II, are impossible to understand without a knowledge of medieval Caesaro-Papism, an adequate grasp of today's headlines from the Middle East demands an awareness of the events and attitudes that have lately shaped the course of these lands.

Hence a survey such as John O. Voll's excellent *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World* (Westview Press, 1982) or Edward Mortimer's slightly more journalistic *Faith and Power: The Politics of Islam* (Vintage, 1982) can serve to initiate the newcomer into the complex cross-currents of revival, reform, accommodation, and resistance that have marked the transformation of the declining Ottoman Imperium into the present assortment of secular nation states whose regimes are variously and often ambiguously allied with religion. A smaller volume expounding a sociology-of-religion viewpoint with an emphasis on the most tumultuous cases is Henry Munson's *Islam and Revolution in the Middle East* (Yale, 1988). Meanwhile, for those preferring a comparative politics approach, Tamara Sonn offers a solid foundation of contemporary efforts to address the intricate overlap of the sacred and the secular in the struggle over defining authority and establishing order in her new study entitled *Between Qur'an and Crown: The Challenge of Political Legitimacy in the Arab World* (Westview, 1990).



Of course, innumerable works of many sorts, including memoirs, biographies, ethnographies, and all manner of histories abound to complement these overviews, but perhaps one recent volume of exceptional interest can be singled out. *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (Simon & Schuster, 1985) by Roy Mottahedeh, presently head of Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, is widely recognized as a rare achievement combining impressive erudition with a vivid narrative to portray the

sometimes arcane culture of Shi'ite religious learning and the tensions within it that eventually burst upon the world stage with the establishment of the Ayatollah's Islamic Republic.

Clearly, the manifold forces and counterforces that presently enliven Muslim societies far surpass the scholarly paradigms available for their assessment, East and West. Or, as religious studies professor Marilyn Waldman modestly put it a few years ago, researchers have yet to "develop a framework commensurate with

the magnitude of contemporary Islam." Hence it is not surprising that much of the most insightful current scholarship is appearing in shorter pieces in the form of articles rather than books. But length should never be confused with authoritativeness. For example, one resource of great usefulness is the landmark *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Macmillan, 1987) which contains scores of relevant entries scattered about under numerous titles but concentrated in volume seven ("Icon to Jensen") where articles such as

"Islam: An Overview," "Islamic Law," and even "Islam in the Americas" provide as informed and current a handbook account for such topics as is available in any language.

Two further titles in this anthology format may be singled out as representative of a constant flow of uneven festschrifts, published papers from academic conferences and special journal issues. First, *Scholars, Saints and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions Since 1500*, edited by N. Keddie, (University of California Press, 1972) is a stellar collection focusing on key regions, axial periods, and seminal issues. Interestingly, its composition slightly predates the explosion of interest and the consequent reappraisals in many quarters that have accompanied the so-called resurgence of Islam. But the substance and quality of its contents is such that their relevance is only heightened by what many observers have perceived to be utterly unanticipated developments. Moreover, the articles are also quite untinged with the possibly distorting tones of retrospective views stimulated by crisis-consciousness. Meanwhile, *The Islamic Impulse*, edited by Barbara Stowasser (Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1987) competently fills this gap which has been produced by the rise of seemingly newer manifestations of religiously inspired activism. It consists of a score of relatively short essays, including case studies dealing with both the popular and the elite levels, ideological and theological analyses, and several insider expositions that chart the main currents of ongoing controversies and conflicts particularly in the Arab world.

Finally, at least one token of a related genre deserves mention in virtue of the growing urgency of genuine ecumenism between ourselves and our Muslim neighbors. Kenneth Cragg's *Muhammad and the Christian: A Question of Response* (Orbis Books, 1984) frames an exceptionally clear and theologically sophisticated discussion of how Christian faith may be articulated, shared, and enriched by an encounter with Islam. The rarity, no less than the timeliness, of a work of this caliber is perhaps a sign that this long overdue global agenda of mutual recognition is dawning at last.

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