

CHRISTIAN
AND
MUSLIM
UNDERSTANDING

JAMAL BADAWI

INTRODUCTION

All grace is due to Allah, Creator and Sustainer of the universe, and I bear witness that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is His servant, messenger and the seal of all the prophets and messengers in history. May Allah's peace and blessing be upon them all.

With nearly one billion followers each, Islam and Christianity are major religions that influence the thinking and values of over 40 percent of the world population. While there are theological differences, some of which might be significant, there are nonetheless other important areas of belief that are shared by both communities: belief in Allah, or God; belief in revelation, in prophets, in the Holy books of Allah; in the life hereafter and in a divinely inspired moral code organizing and regulating human life during our earthly journey to eternity.

MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

For the Muslim, constructive dialogue is not only permitted it is commendable. In the Qur'an we read, "Say, 'O people of the book' (a term which particularly refers to Jews and Christians) 'come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with Him (in His powers and divine attributes); that we erect not from among ourselves lords and patrons other than Allah.' If then they turn back say you 'Bear witness that we are Muslims.' (Bowing) to the will of God." (al-i-Imran; 3:64).

The methodology of that dialogue is also explained in the Qur'an; "Invite (all) to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful exhortation, and argue with them in ways that are best." (al-Nahl; 16:125) A prerequisite for any constructive dialogue is that both communities should not learn about each other through sources that are unsympathetic, critical, or even hostile: they should rather try to formulate an honest idea as to how the other faith is seen in its own authentic scriptures and as practiced by those who are truly committed to it. This need is even

more significant in the case of the Muslim-Christian dialogue. The average Christian has heard of or has read about Islam mostly through writers who have had colonial or missionary motives, which might have given a certain slant to their interpretation of Islam to the western mind. While I admit that my own practice of Islam is far from perfect, I atleast speak from the vantage point of someone who wants to think of himself as a committed, practicing Muslim.

Now I'd like to share with you five basic areas, consideration of which is imperative in any Christian-Muslim understanding: the meaning of the term "Islam"; the meaning of the term "Allah"; the nature of the human; the relationship between the human and Allah; the question of accountability, and finally, some conclusions pertaining to understanding between Muslims and Christians.

MEANING OF "ISLAM"

Taking the term "Islam", it is important to emphasize that it is not derived from the name of any particular person, race or locality. A Muslim considers the term used by some writers, "Mohammedanism," to be an offensive violation of the very spirit of Islamic teaching.

The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, is not worshipped, nor is he regarded as either the founder of Islam or the author of its Holy Book, the Qur'an. The term "Islam" is given in more than one place in the Qur'an itself. It is derived from the Arabic root (SLM) which connotes "peace" or "submission." Indeed, the proper meaning of "Islam" is the attainment of peace, both inner and outer peace, by submission of oneself to the will of Allah. And when we say submit, we are talking about conscious, loving and trusting submission to the will of Allah, the acceptance of His grace and the following of His path. In that sense the Muslim regards the term Islam, not as an innovation that came in the 7th Century, Christian era, with the advent of the

Prophet Muhammad, but as the basic mission of all the prophets throughout history. That universal mission was finally culminated and perfected in the last of these prophets, Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon them all.

ISLAMIC MONOTHEISM

The next essential concept that needs to be clarified is the term "Allah." What does it mean? It should be emphasized first that the term "Allah" has no connotation at all of a tribal god, an Arabian or even a Muslim god. The term "Allah" in Arabic simply means the One and Only True, Universal God of all. To think that Allah is different from God, with a capital 'G,' is no more valid than saying the French Christians worship a different god because they call him "Dieu."

What are the basic attributes of Allah? The Qur'an mentions the "most beautiful names" (or attributes) of Allah. Instead of enumerating them all, let's examine a few. Some attributes emphasize the transcendence of Allah. The Qur'an repeatedly makes it clear that Allah is beyond our limited perception. "There is nothing whatever comparable unto Him." (al-Shura; 42:11) "No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision." (al-An'am; 6:103) A Muslim never thinks of God as having any particular image, whether physical, human, material or otherwise. Such attributes as "The Perfectly-Knowing," "The Eternal," "The Omnipotent," "The Omnipresent," "The Just," and "The sovereign" also emphasize transcendence. But this does not mean sophical concept or a deity far removed. Indeed, alongside this emphasis on the transcendence of Allah, the Qur'an also talks about Allah as "personal" God who is close, easily approachable, Loving Forgiving and Merciful. The very first passage in the Qur'an, which is repeated dozens of times, is "In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful . . ." The Qur'an tells us that when Allah created the first human "He breathed into him something of His spirit," (al-Sajdah; 32:9) and that "Allah is closer to the human

than his jugular vein." In another beautiful and moving passage we are told, "When my servants ask you (O Muhammad) concerning me, then surely I am near to them. I listen to every suppliant who calls on Me. Let them respond to My call and obey My command that they may be led aright."

For the Muslim, monotheism does not mean simply the unity of God, because there can be different persons in unity. Monotheism in Islam is the absolute Oneness and Uniqueness of Allah, which precludes the notion of persons sharing in Godhead. The opposite of monotheism in Islam is called in Arabic "shirk," association of others with Allah. This includes not only polytheism, but also dualism (believing in one God for good or light and another for evil or darkness). The concept of "shirk" also includes pantheism, the idea that God is in everything. All forms of God-incarnate philosophies are excluded by Islam's monotheism, as is blind obedience to dictators, to clergy, or to one's own whims and desires. These all are regarded as forms of "associating" others with Allah (shirk), whether by believing that such creatures of Allah possess divinity or by believing that they share the Divine Attributes of Allah.

It should be added that to the Muslim, monotheism is not simply a dogma. Islam's pure, pristine and strict monotheism is much more than a thought or a belief; it is something that deeply influences the Muslim's whole outlook on life.

NATURE OF THE HUMAN

We have talked about Allah. What about you and me? Who is the human being? Who are you and I? And why are we here on earth? The Qur'an teaches that we humans are created of three components. We are created from clay, representing the material or carnal element. We are endowed with intellect that is Allah-given to be used, not to be put on the shelf. Reason may be insufficient but it is not the antithesis of faith, either. And thirdly, we are endowed with the spirit of Allah, which was breathed into us (al-Sajdah; 32:7, al-Baqarah; 2:31, al-Hijr; 15:29). The

Muslim does not see human existence here on earth as punishment for eating from the forbidden tree. That event is regarded as an experiential lesson for Adam and Eve before they came to earth. The Qur'an teaches that even before the creation of the first human it was Allah's plan to establish human life and civilization on earth (al-Baqarah; 2:30). Thus, the Muslim does not view the human as all evil, nor as all good, but rather as responsible. It is stated in several places in the Qur'an that Allah created the human to be His "khalifah," His trustee or viceregent on earth. Humankind's basic trust, our responsibility, is to worship Allah. Worship for the Muslim is not only engaging in formal rituals, but it is any activity in accordance with the will of Allah for the benefit of oneself and of humanity at large. Thus the Muslim views the earth, its resources and ecology as a gift from Allah to humans to harness and use in fulfillment of the trust for which we shall all be held responsible. That is why the Qur'an speaks highly of learning. The first word revealed of the Qur'an was, "Recite," or "read." As long as they were true to their faith and to Qur'anic injunctions about learning, Muslims established a civilization that saw great advances in science and in the humanities. Not only did they preserve earlier scientific heritage but they also added to it and paved the way for European renaissance. When Muslims again become true to their faith such history is bound to repeat itself.

ALLAH-HUMANKIND RELATIONSHIP

We talked of Allah and of humankind. Now we must ask what is their basic relationship. The Qur'an teaches us that the human race is given an innate pure nature called "fitrah." Knowledge of Allah and innate spirituality are inherent in human existence, but this spirituality can betray us if it is not led in the right direction. To depend on a merely human feeling of the guiding Spirit is dangerous. Many groups, even cults, claim to be guided by the spirit or by God or by revelation, yet these groups holds

divergent, even contradictory, beliefs. We find people behaving in contradictory ways who claim nonetheless that each is doing the will of God. "I feel," they say, "that the spirit guides and directs me."

A credible source of revelation is imperative. Throughout history Allah has selected particular individuals to convey His message, to receive His revelation and to exemplify it for mankind. For some of these prophets, holy books or scriptures were given revealing Allah's commands and guidance. For most of you the names of these prophets found in the Qur'an will sound familiar: Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, John the Baptist, Jesus, and, finally, the last prophet, Muhammad, peace be upon them all. These prophets carried the same basic message: 'Not an apostle did We send before you without this inspiration sent by Us to him: that there is no god but I; therefore worship and serve Me.' (al Anbiya'; 21 : 25) Further, the Qur'an insists on calling all those Prophets Muslims, because a Muslim is one who submits to the will of Allah. Their followers are called Muslims as well. Thus it is an article of faith for a Muslim to believe in all these prophets. Indeed, Muslims are warned that anyone who accepts some prophets and rejects others, in fact rejects them all. For a Muslim, to believe in Moses while rejecting Jesus or Muhammad is against the very teaching of Moses. And to believe in Jesus but reject Moses or Muhammad is to violate what Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad stood for. For a Muslim to believe in Muhammad and reject either Moses or Jesus is to violate his own Holy Book. "Those who deny Allah and His apostles, and (those who) wish to separate Allah from His apostles, saying: 'We believe in some but reject others,' and (those who) wish to take a course midway. They are in truth (equally) unbelievers and We have prepared for unbelievers a humiliating punishment." (al-Nisa'; 4:150-151) Recognition of all prophets is an article of faith, not a mere social courtesy or diplomatic statement. I do hope that with open minds, open hearts and further

careful, honest study there may be more such mutual recognition.

THE SPECIAL ROLE OF MUHAMMAD

But why do Muslims in their testimony of faith say, "I bear witness that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is His messenger"? Does that mean that they in fact reject other prophets? Indeed, the special role played by Muhammad as the seal and last of all the prophets puts the Muslim in the position whereby honoring Muhammad implies honoring those who came before him as well. Muslims are warned not to make fanatical or parochial distinctions between prophets (al-Baqarah; 2:285). But the Qur'an also says that Allah has favored some prophets with more significant gifts or roles than others (Al-Isra'; 17:55). All are brothers, although the only prophet with the universal mission to all humankind is Muhammad, peace be upon him (al-Furqaan; 25:11). The Muslim believes not only that Muhammad is a brother to Jesus, Moses, Abraham and other prophets, but the Qur'an states in clear terms that the advent of Muhammad was foretold by previous prophets, including Moses and Jesus, peace be upon them (al-Araf; 7:157, al-Saff; 61:6). Even the Bible in its present form clearly foretells the advent of the Prophet Muhammad (e.g. Genesis 21:13, 18, Deuteronomy 18:18 and 33:1-3, Isaiah 11:1-4, 21:13-17, 42:1-13 and others).

For the Muslim, the Qur'an contains the words of Allah directly and verbatim revealed to Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. Many confuse the Qur'an with the "Hadith," or sayings, of the Prophet. The Hadith is quite separate from the Qur'an. The latter was dictated to Muhammad word for word through the Angel Gabriel and immediately memorized and put down in writing. It is important to emphasize that the Qur'an was neither written nor composed by Muhammad, peace be upon him. To hold such a view would contradict what the Qur'an says of itself and of Muhammad; that the prophet is not

speaking on his own but only transmitting the revelation dictated to him by the Angel Gabriel. To suggest that the Qur'an borrowed from or copied from previous revelations, be it the Bible or otherwise, is, for a Muslim, an accusation of "prophetic plagiarism," a contradiction in terms. The fact that there are similarities between the Qur'an and previous scriptures is simply explained by the fact that He Who spoke through those earlier prophets is He Who revealed the Qur'an to Muhammad, the one and only true God, Allah. However, the Qur'an is the last revealed Holy Book, which supersedes previous scriptures and the only one still available in the exact words and language uttered by Prophet Muhammad.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND SALVATION

We have talked about Allah, about the human and about the relationship between them. What about accountability? How can we humans, from the Islamic perspective, overcome "sin"? The Qur'an teaches that life is a test, that earthly life is temporary (al-Mulk; 67:2). The Muslim believes that there is reward and punishment, that there is life hereafter and that reward or punishment do not necessarily wait until the day of Judgement. but start immediately after burial. The Muslim believes in resurrection, accountability, and the day of judgment.

For a Muslim, to demand perfection in order to gain salvation is not practical. It is demanding the impossible and is unjust. Islam teaches a person to be humble and to learn that we cannot achieve salvation by our own righteousness. The reconciliation of the "sinful" human with Allah is contingent on three elements: the most important is the Grace, Mercy, and Generosity of Allah. Then there are good deeds and correct belief. Correct belief and good deeds are prerequisites for God's Grace and Forgiveness and for rising above our common shortcomings. How can sin be washed away? The Qur'an gives the prescription: "If anyone does evil or wrongs his own soul, but afterwards seeks Allah's forgiveness, he will find Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful." (al-Nisa'; 4:110). Another moving passage reads, "Those

things that are good remove evil deeds." (Hud; 11:114) Islam teaches repentance, stopping evil ways, feeling sorry for what one has done, and determining to follow the path of Allāh as much as humanly possible. The Muslim does not believe in the necessity of the shedding of blood, much less innocent blood, to wash away sins. He believes that Allah is not interested in blood or sacrifice, but in sincere repentance. The Qur'an puts it clearly: "But My Mercy extends to all things." (al-A'raf; 7:156).

THE APPLIED ASPECT

How about the application? Are we just talking theology? Since the human is Allah's trustee, it would be inconsistent for a Muslim to separate the various aspects of life, the spiritual and the material, state and religion. We hear a lot about the "five pillars of Islam." but they are often presented as the whole of Islam, many times in a shallow way. They are not the whole of Islam any more than one can claim to have a functional house composed exclusively of five concrete pillars. You also need the ceiling, walls, tables, windows and other things. As mathematicians put it, it is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. The five pillars of Islam (the testimony of faith, the five daily prayers, fasting, charity, pilgrimage) are presented by most writers as matters of formal ritual. Even the pillar that is liable to appear ritualistic, daily prayers, is a purely spiritual act involving much more than simply getting up and down. It has social and political lessons to teach the Muslim. What may appear as separate compartments of life simply does not exist for the Muslim. A Muslim does not say, "This is business and this is moral." Moral spiritual, economic, social and governmental are interrelated, because everything, including Caesar, belongs to Allah and to Allah alone.

MUSLIM/NON-MUSLIM RELATIONS

In conclusion and against this background, what is the implication for the Muslims in their attitudes towards non-Muslims? To start with, and we must be frank about it, the Qur'an makes it incumbent on the

Muslim to convey Allah's message in its final form, the Qur'an, to all humanity. We are not talking here about conversion. I do not like that word. Indeed, to turn to Islam, the religion of all the prophets in its final form, is not to turn one's back on the preceding prophets. It is an augmentation, rather than a conversion, because it does not involve changing one's basic spiritual nature. In the Qur'an, pure human nature is a "Muslim nature," which knows its Lord and wishes to submit to Him. The Qur'an states, "Let there be no compulsion in religion." (al-Baqarah; 2:256) My substitute for the term "conversion" is "reversion," in the sense of a return to the pure monotheism in which we were all created. Thus the Muslim is taught to be tolerant toward others. Indeed, the Qur'an not only prohibits compulsion in religion, but it prohibits aggression as well, although it allows defense: "Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but commit no aggression; for Allah loves not transgressors." (al-Baqarah; 2:190).

In addition, we find that within this broad rule of dealing with non-Muslims "the People of the Book" is a special term accorded to Jews and Christians in the Qur'an. Why "People of the Book"? Because the Muslim makes a clear distinction between a polytheist or an atheist and those who follow the prophets who originally received revelations from Allah. Even though a Muslim might point out areas of theological difference, we still believe in the divine origin of those revelations in their "original" forms.

How should a Muslim treat these "People of the Book"? Says the Qur'an: "Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for [your] Faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for Allah loves those who are just. Allah only forbids you, with regard to those [others] who fight you for [your] Faith, and drive you out of your homes and support [others] in driving you out, from turning to them [for friendship and protection]. It is such as turn to them [in these circumstances], that do wrong." (al-Mumtahanah; 60:8-9).

In the world today all believers in Allah are facing common dangers: atheism, materialism, secularism and moral decay. We must work together. Allah says in the Qur'an: "...If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single People, but His Plan is to test you in what He has given you. So strive as in a race in all virtues. The return of you all is to Allah; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which you dispute." (al-Ma'idah; 5:51).

I hope, feel, and trust that there is sufficient common ground for Muslims and Christians to meet, understand each other, join hands and move together in the Path of Truth, Peace, and Justice, the Path of Allah.

Thank you very much for your patience and may peace be with you.

