

Understanding Islam

Introduction to the UI Course

This series of articles has been written by Dr Chris Hewer to accompany the Understanding Islam programmes on Ahl ul-Bayt TV. Each article corresponds with one television programme although some additional material might be found in one but not the other. These articles will, for example, contain Qur'an references that you can follow up in a copy of the Qur'an (many English translations are available on the internet as well as printed copies). Qur'an references will be given in square brackets beginning Q. for Qur'an, then a chapter number followed by a colon, and then a verse number, e.g., [Q. 2:284-285] . The corresponding TV programme can be found in the "On Demand" section of the Ahl ul-Bayt TV website on the "Understanding Islam" page (www.ahlulbayt.tv/understandingislam). The course is intended to build in many parts into a first introduction for anyone who wants to understand Islam.

Who knows best what Islam is about? Muslims do; so this course will aim to help people to understand Islam as Muslims believe it and live it. Which Muslims? Well, Islam is a diverse way of life that is understood differently in many details by different Muslim groups and individuals but there is a broad agreement on the solid central elements of Islam, which is what I shall try to explain. We may call this "mainstream Islam." From time to time the diverse positions taken by different Muslims will be explored. The author is a Christian and thus I am bound by Christian ethical principles, a key one of which is to "do unto others what you would have them do unto you." It would offend me if a Muslim were to teach a course about Christianity that was coloured by her Muslim understanding in such a way that I felt that my faith was being distorted; therefore I will try diligently not to do that to Islam in this course. We could extend the principle, to "seek to understand others as you would like them to understand you." That is the ethical principle that readers and viewers are invited to assume in working through this course.

A couple of other biblical principles come to mind. There is the Commandment given to Moses: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour." This rules out partial truths, half-truths and downright lies that have been part of the history of dealings with Islam and Muslims down through the centuries. We will seek to explore the whole truth about Islam even if that makes people feel uncomfortable at times. Similarly, when Moses encountered the divine presence at the burning bush, he was told to take off his shoes as the ground on which he stood was holy. We are about to step onto Muslim holy ground and therefore a degree of respect is in order.

The course has deliberately been called "Understanding Islam" with the emphasis on understanding. To understand a way of life requires more than just accumulating knowledge and understanding it in our heads. We may call this intellectual understanding. To understand a way of life though requires also that we should attempt to feel what it is like to follow that way. This "feeling knowledge" we could call "the knowledge of the heart" or intuitive knowledge. During this course we will

attempt to understand Islam both with our heads and our hearts; to know and feel what it is from the perspective of a Muslim. We may call this “empathetic understanding.”

When we come to look at any religious tradition, especially one that has existed for many centuries, we are aware that there are ideals and realities. We need to understand both but, I would argue, we need first to understand the ideals so that we can appreciate how far short some of the realities fall. We cannot escape the realities and some of them over the centuries and today are unpleasant. Bad things have been done by people who proclaim themselves to be Muslims and sometimes it has been claimed by them that there is an “Islamic justification” for their actions. It is important to see the difference between ideals and realities but, even more important, to know when we compare Muslim ways of life with whatever we might think or do ourselves that we are comparing like with like. There is a temptation when studying another faith or way of life to compare “my wonderful ideals” with “your sordid realities” and we can see where that can lead us.

There is a fundamental difference between understanding something and agreeing with it. I can seek to understand the factors that might lead someone to become an alcoholic without agreeing that this is a good life stance. I can understand how a parent at the end of their tether hits a child without agreeing that this is a good way of parenting. This course seeks to promote understanding but no-one is asked to agree with what Islam teaches or adopt a Muslim way of life. This is not a conversion exercise! We are free to understand and disagree. Islam teaches that God gave us intellect, reason and freedom to puzzle things out and decide for ourselves. God does not compel human beings to believe [Q. 2:256]. Critical questions and observations are allowed and from time to time these will be addressed in the course. There will also be the opportunity to submit questions to be addressed in the monthly extended TV programmes (by e-mailing understandingislam@ahlulbayt.tv).