

Magnet is the Methodist Communications Quarterly, which places emphasis on the art of communication. The editor invited Chris Hewer to contribute a short introductory article on how Christians might communicate an understanding of Islam for their Winter 2006 edition.

Communicating an understanding of Islam

Let me set you a challenge: how would you put together ten sessions to help secular people with no concept of what religion entails to understand Christianity? Where would you start? Let's add to the question: what if the people followed their own religion and so had some concept of what it is to "be religious"? Would that make a difference? Finally, what if the people were Jews or Muslims and so had a direct relationship to Christianity (and maybe some misperceptions too!). What difference would that make? These questions help to explore the kind of communication issue with which I have been struggling for the last twenty years: how to help Christians understand Islam.

Guiding principles

If someone wanted to know about my Christianity, I would want them first to understand the beautiful rich ideals on which we hope to base our lives, rather than beginning with some of the sordid realities that have darkened our history. Of course, we cannot escape the realities but surely we need the context of our ideals to gain a proper perspective? "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." I set out first to help people understand the ideals of the Islamic faith in their beauty and richness, whilst not running away from some of the sordid realities as well. I think that we should be guided by the Commandment given to Moses: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour". If I distort Islam or tell just half the story, would I not be guilty of sin against this Commandment? Do we have anything to fear by teaching and understanding the full message of Islam?

Whose Islam? we might ask. Well, first of all, I take it that Islam is what Muslim believers say it is and so I want to understand it as Muslims do and not through the lens of a Christian perspective. I wouldn't like it if Muslims try to tell me what Christianity is all about! Of course, Islam is not a single monolithic faith any more than is Christianity; it has a spectrum of beliefs, opinions and practices within its acceptable boundaries. There is always a problem with studying another faith; one needs to know enough so as not to make false comparisons. There is always a temptation to compare "my wonderful ideals" with "your sordid realities"!

Where to start

One might think the best place to start would be with the Prophet Muhammad, who was born in 570 CE and received the Qur'an as a scripture that Muslims understand to have been revealed as the literal "Word of God". This would be a misunderstanding as Islam does not begin there. One might go back to Abraham, with his two wives Sarah and Hagar, and his two sons Ishmael and Isaac. Whilst Jews are the descendants of Isaac, and Christians the spiritual descendants of Jesus the Jew, Muslims understand themselves to be descended in the line of Abraham's first-born son, Ishmael. God promised Abraham that he would raise up a mighty nation under God's protection descended from Abraham through Ishmael (Gen 24). This is not the starting point either. To understand Islam, we need to build a framework that centres on God, the one, the eternal, who was worshipped by Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, and who, according to the Qur'an, created human beings for no other purpose than to worship God.

Understanding Islam

In this short space, it is only possible to sketch this framework in which one can begin to understand Islam. To gain a fuller introduction, one needs to read my book: *Understanding Islam: the first ten steps*, (London:SCM, 2006).

According to an Islamic understanding then, God is one and unlike any other being or thing. God is eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing and cannot be tied down to any place. In God's very essence, God is unknowable. We can only say something about God because God chose to create everything that exists. Even then, we know that our best efforts always fall hopelessly short of the mark. God, being perfect, could only create a perfect creation. Or better to say, the creation is as perfect as it can be given that it is stuck in time and space and therefore bound to decay from the moment that it was made. This creation is created in a state of harmony with God that can only come about through knowing and obeying the divine will. This is the meaning of the word "*islam*"; it is that perfect state of harmony and peace with God and within all creation that is the way that God intended it to be and can only come about through submission to the divine will.

Something is "*muslim*" when it is in the state of *islam*. This means that we can speak about God creating a *muslim* universe, that is in the state of perfect *islam*. Planets, sun, rivers, mountains and earth are *muslim*, as are trees, plants and flowers, and animals, birds and fishes too. The rest of creation has no choice about being *muslim*, that is in the nature that is imprinted into every element of creation, except that is, the human being, who is uniquely created with freewill and so we can freely choose to accept our human calling of worshipping God and submitting all to the divine will. In this way, every human being is called to be the Loving Servant of God and to be the Regent of God on earth. We will all be responsible for our record in following this calling on the Day of Judgement, when we will be rewarded with Paradise or sent to Hell.

In order to fulfil this duty, we need guidance from God and so God has been sending essentially the same guidance to human beings from the earliest times. Adam and Eve were the first to receive this guidance and it has been sent to every community of humans on earth. The Qur'an is only the last in a long line of books sent by God for human guidance. Guidance needs to be sent to a Prophet who can put it into practice and lead others on the right path. Adam was the first Prophet and at least one has been sent to every people on earth. The Qur'an lists twenty-five of these but there were many more. Those listed include twenty-one from the biblical tradition, including Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Muhammad is held to be the Last in this chain and the Seal of the Prophets.

Each of these Prophets established a way of life or *Shari'a* based on this guidance. The way of life established by Muhammad was (capital I) Islam and its followers are the Muslims. They understand themselves to be the last of these Godly communities, who follow the purest deposit of guidance sent down by God. Through shaping a life based on the Qur'an and practice of Prophet Muhammad, that is following the religion of Islam, which gives guidance for every aspect of life, they hope to grow into a state of God-consciousness, which through the mercy of God will lead to Paradise in the life hereafter.

Once we have this framework in mind, we can see that Muslims regard Islam as a continuation, re-affirmation and clarification of the earlier revelations sent to the earth by God. This means that Muslims have a necessary respect for the earlier Prophets, e.g. Moses and Jesus, and the earlier religions established by them, e.g. Judaism and Christianity, whilst also being critical of anything that has been forgotten or corrupted by their followers over the centuries. Within this framework, we can see the practices of religion as a training ground on the path to the loving service of God in all things: prayer, worship, ethical living, economics, charity, the unity of humankind under God, social teaching and the struggle to implement the will of God on earth. Now we are on the way as Christians to understanding Islam.