

UNDERSTANDING THE MUSLIM WORLDVIEW:
AN EVANGELICAL PERSPECTIVE

by Sam Schlorff

Perhaps you, like me, have found it difficult to understand "what makes the Muslim tick." Over the years, I have often been puzzled by the things I have seen or heard, or read about, in the Muslim world. How can an intelligent person, for example, claim to "believe in all the Prophets and all the Scriptures," but when challenged to read the Bible he dismisses it by an "Oh but it has been corrupted!"? And in a different realm, how can the "Fundamentalist" be so confident that a return to Islamic Law will solve the economic and social problems of the Muslim world today when that same Law could not prevent the decline of Islam centuries earlier. One could go on and on.

The Approach of Doctrinal Comparison

Christians instinctively try to penetrate the Muslim mindset through a comparative study of Muslim and Christian doctrines. Such an approach would seem to be logical inasmuch as Christianity itself is theology-oriented. To this day, theology continues to preoccupy the best theological minds in the church, and the flow of theological works from their pens shows no sign of letting up. It must be said that we learn a lot through this approach; it highlights the many similarities in theological formulation that exist between the two religions, as well as the more obvious differences.

By itself, however, doctrinal comparison cannot explain the Muslim mindset. Despite all the similarities that exist between Islam and Christianity, at bottom Muslims and Christians operate on very different wave-lengths. Doctrinal comparison cannot help you see how or why Islam is a world-in-life view that not only makes sense, given certain presuppositions, but also has a powerful attraction to the Muslim. Above all, the approach ignores a fundamental difference between the two religions in their attitudes toward doctrine itself. Islam is law-oriented rather than theology-oriented.

Notice, for example, that doctrine is viewed in Islam as being more or less a preamble to Islamic Law. Called the *Shariah*, it is a comprehensive code that governs every aspect of the Muslim's life, both his inner thought life and overt actions. The Muslim Creed defines the parameters of "right-thinking" and the *Shariah* itself of "right-acting." Like the five so-called "Pillars" of Islam, the six "Articles of Faith"--belief in God, His Angels, Prophets, Books, and Decrees, and in the Last Day--are considered "obligatory." Every Muslim is under formal obligation to confess them verbally and endorse them intellectually. They are adhered to by Shiite and Sunni alike--with very little difference between them.

Beyond these six Articles of Faith, the theologians (*Mutakallimān* in Arabic) have defined the rational bases of the faith. But since the Middle Ages there has been precious little original thinking comparable to what we as Christians would call "theology." The creative

intellectual energy of Muslims has been directed instead into other channels, such as Qur'anic exegesis and legal theory, political science, and above all ideology. By ideology I mean "the integrated assertions, theories and aims that constitute a sociopolitical program" (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1977). Muslim society is an ideological society. This is not to say that all Muslims are equally ideological, but rather that Muslim society as a whole is ideological in nature; it has its own distinctive sociopolitical program. To understand the Muslim mind, then, we need to look beyond Islamic doctrine per se to its total worldview.

A Look at The Muslim Worldview

I shall devote the remainder of this article to analyzing some of the main elements of the Islamic worldview and ideology. I must acknowledge here that much of what follows is not original with me; many of the ideas and analyses have been picked up over the years from others and made my own. Nevertheless, I would be hard put at this point to trace many of them to their sources. If there is anything original it is the effort to relate the Muslim worldview at every point to an evangelical theological perspective. Practically all that has been written on the subject is from a liberal, more or less secular, standpoint that relates the Muslim worldview to a secular view of society. While very helpful these lack the perspective and insights that are important to evangelicals.

A Key Concept--Submission

The key idea that integrates everything into one cohesive system is found in the word Islam itself. It is of course an Arabic word, a kind of verbal noun that Arabs call a "Masdar." As Muslims love to tell you, the word means "submission," while the term Muslim means "one who submits." The word's importance lies in the fact that it defines the relationship which, Muslims believe, God intends should exist between Himself and man. The corresponding verb (aslama) means to "make peace," "surrender," or "submit." It is typically used of the vanquished laying down his arms before the victor; he is "submitting." The Islamic ideal is that every aspect of life, whether as individuals or as a society, should be lived in submission to God.

This ideal is expressed in the principal synonyms for God and man in the Qur'an: Rabb ("Lord") and 'abd ("slave"). Five times a day when Muslims perform the Ritual Prayer, they must recite the first Sura of the Qur'an, addressing God as "Lord of the worlds" (1:2), and bow with faces to the ground as His "slaves." This ideal is also expressed in many of the most popular names Muslims give their sons, which combine the form 'abd with Allah or one of the "ninety-nine names of God": e.g. Abdur-Rahmān (Slave of the Compassionate), Abdul-Azīz (Slave of the Almighty), Abdul-Haqq (Slave of the True One), Abdus-Salām (Slave of the Peaceful), etc.

As Christians, it is good to keep in mind that the Bible also has something important to say about submission to God. We read for example in James 4:7, "Submit yourselves, then, to God." One could say that submission to God is part and parcel of Jesus' teaching on discipleship and the Kingdom of God. The theme of "serving" God is

also very important in Scripture (the Old Testament Hebrew terms for "servant," "serve," "service," etc. are from the same root as the Arabic term 'abd). Christians too are to be "servants" of God--through Jesus Christ. We may therefore legitimately affirm that Muslims cannot lay exclusive claim to the term "Muslim" ("those who submit"). Christians also seek to live in submission to God. And yet we must also say that the Biblical idea of submission and service to God differs radically from that of the Qur'an. This is because the Qur'anic idea is based on some very different presuppositions as to what is involved in that submission.

Five Basic Assumptions

At this point I need to introduce five more ideas, also quite foreign to the Christian worldview, which help explain the Islamic understanding of submission. I call them assumptions as they are more or less assumed in all that is said and done, without necessarily being expressed in so many words. There are of course many other important concepts in the Muslim worldview that would have to be mentioned if we were trying to be exhaustive. I point out these five, however, because they help explain the Muslim worldview to Christians who are not accustomed to this way of thinking.

Absolute Transcendence

The first concerns the nature of God. When I read Muslim writings on the Islamic doctrine of God, I am always struck by how much there is that is formally similar to Christian theological writings on the subject. Differences there are but these are less noticeable than the similarities, and are subtle and hard to interpret. There is however one difference that has had a significant influence on the divergences that exist between Islam and Christianity. This is Islam's doctrine of absolute transcendence. Muslims insist that God is Wholly Other or, in the language of the theologians, "dissimilar to contingent beings." A passage of the Qur'an that Muslims often quote declares that "there is nothing like unto Him" (laila kamithlihi shay - Surah 42:11).

Christians, of course, also hold a doctrine of transcendence, but the Muslim doctrine is more stringent. The Muslim view implies that to all intents and purposes God is unknowable, whereas for Christians God can be known. Muslims will claim to have a "knowledge" of God, but what they mean by that is a knowledge of truth about God, not the knowledge of God as a person of which Jesus speaks e.g. in John 17:3. They insist, against the Christian view, that God does not "reveal Himself" to man; He only reveals His will. Neither does there exist any analogical relationship between God and man such as you find in the Biblical teaching that man is created in the "Image of God." In a word, God's transcendence is absolute.

Human goodness

Closely related to this is a second assumption, implicit to the Muslim idea of submission, that concerns the nature of man. Islam holds that mankind is essentially "good" and "pure" (cf. Sura 95:4), although "weak" and "forgetful" (4:28; 20:115). In the Qur'anic

account of the Adam and Eve story, they did not intend to disobey; they simply "forgot" God's command. Islam categorically rejects the Biblical doctrine of a moral fall. Muslims insist that our present separation from God is due to God's transcendence, not a sinful human nature. While we may and do sin, this is due mainly to "ethical misperception" and not sinfulness. We have the moral power not to sin; we can do the Good. What we need then is not salvation, but "guidance." With "guidance" from God we are able to live a life of submission that pleases God. After Adam sinned, God "relented" and "forgave" him, promised him "guidance," and assured him he had "nothing to fear" provided he followed that guidance (20:115-127).

It is worth pausing to note that all this means that mankind's present situation is the normal human condition. For the Bible, of course, it is abnormal. In the beginning, God did not create us as we now are--creatures who readily sin, however our sinful nature be explained. Neither does He intend that we stay as we now are. The Bible gives the Christian the hope of one day being "liberated" from the creation's present "bondage to decay" and experiencing the "redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:21-23). Islamic eschatology does not give Muslims the hope of one day being without sin.

Divine Guidance

A third assumption, equally basic to Islam, is that God has provided the guidance that man needs. "Guidance" is one of the central themes of the Qur'an, occurring in some form of the verb *hadā* ("to guide") just over two hundred times, and in the noun form *hudā* ("guidance") eighty-five times. Add to that related terms and ideas and the theme takes on great significance. Guidance is said to be found in the books of Moses and of Jesus (e.g. Sura 3:3), but above all in the Qur'an, which is frequently called "a guidance and a mercy for believers" (e.g. 27:77). The Qur'an, which came via Muhammad, the Traditions (Hadiths) concerning what Muhammad said and did, and certain other sources constitute the religious law--the Shari'ah referred to above--which Muslims believe to be the very "Law of God."

We need to pause once again to note that the Bible also has something important to say about religious law, but again its view is quite the opposite. Romans 8 sums up the Biblical view on this subject. It states (vs. 3) that religious law is "powerless" to help mankind live the life of true submission that God requires because it is "weakened by the sinful nature." Admittedly, the passage is speaking of the law of Moses, but that is mainly because it was the only religious law existing at the time. The principle applies to all religious law, however, including that of Islam.

One can acknowledge, for the sake of argument, that the Shari'ah is basically good [there is no doubt but that some of its provisions are unjust, but we must say that much of it is just and good, as when it forbids killing, stealing, adultery and the like]. The point of Romans 8, however, is that even if the Shari'ah, like the Torah of Moses, were the very Law of God, as Muslims believe, it would still be "powerless" to effect true submission to God. The problem is not so much the Shari'ah itself as human nature. Reliance on law to effect submission to God assumes, gratuitously, that human nature is

naturally good. On the contrary, according to vss. 7 and 8 human nature is actually "hostile to God." As the passage goes on to explain, "It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God."

A Community of Submission

The above three assumptions lead up to a fourth which represents another key idea in the Muslim worldview: its concept of community. By 722 AD, Muhammad's preaching had aroused violent opposition in the city of Mecca, and his life and the lives of his followers were in jeopardy. He had, however, come to have a sizable following in the city of Medina, some 300 miles to the north. The Muslims of Medina invited him to mediate their differences with various tribal groups in the city. So Muhammad accepted their offer, and fled with his followers to Medina. That well-known event, called the Hijrah (the "emigration"), gave Muhammad a power base from which he was able to neutralize or eliminate the opposition and take control of Medina, and eventually of the entire Arabian peninsula and beyond.

What is generally less well-known is the significance of this event in the Muslim worldview. Muslims consider it to be the pivotal event of history, and have made it the starting point of the Muslim calendar. They believe that God's ultimate objective in "calling" Muhammad to be His "Messenger" was the creation of a new universal social order. The Hijrah marks for them the beginning of this new world order, which they identify with the "Nation" (or "Community") of Islam--the "Ummah." They consider it to be the first nation or community in history to live in true "submission" to the "Law of God." Hence, the religion of that community is called "Al-Islām" - "The Submission." Muhammad himself, the "supreme lawgiver," was its first head of state. After his death he was "succeeded" by a sequence of "Caliphs" ("Caliph" means "one who comes after"), who were chosen to rule the community in his place.

That first community at Medina represents for Muslims the model community--living-in-submission-to-God of all of time. It is considered to be the exemplar which the Muslim community must thereafter strive to emulate. They consider it to be superior to other types of social organization, such as capitalism, communism or socialism, since it is based, as they put it, on the very "Law of God," and not on "man-made" law codes derived from custom and human legal reasoning as are these Western systems. The model requires a Muslim governmental apparatus that provides the legal and social conditions that are necessary to facilitate keeping the law, and then enforces the law. The idea is that this makes for a much higher degree of piety and submission to God in the community than you find in other social systems. Indeed it is necessary for there to be true submission. There is no separation between the sacred and the secular, between church and state. This Community of Submission is one, universal, and cohesive--it represents for Muslims the Kingdom of God on earth.

A "Heavenly" Culture

One further aspect of this idea of community that should be mentioned is the assumption that Islamic religious culture is of "heavenly" or

divine origin. This appears to derive mainly from the Muslim view of revelation. The Qur'an commonly describes the way it was revealed in terms of "sending down" material from an archetypal scripture in heaven called the "Preserved Tablet" or "Mother of Books"; the Arabic verbs nazzala, anzala and related forms, meaning "to send down," are used over 260 times. From this Muslims draw two conclusions that are at the basis of the assumption that Islam is a heavenly culture: viz., that the Qur'an has an absolutely unique divine status that makes it supra-historical, and that the very language in which it was revealed, Arabic, comes from God. Arabs commonly refer to the Qur'an as tanzil ["a sending down"] and kitāb sanawī ["heavenly scripture"], and to Arabic as luġat as-samā' ["the language of heaven"].

A number of rules and practices illustrate this. Because of space limitations I can just list a few without further clarification. First of all there is the notion that the Qur'an cannot be translated, that many of its words have too rich a meaning to be put into any other language. Indeed, Muslims tend to feel that to fully understand the Qur'an, in a word to be fully Muslim, one must read it in the sacred Arabic. Related to this is the requirement that the ritual prayers and other obligatory liturgical acts, such as the Shahāda (confession of faith) must be recited in Arabic. For this same reason, converts to Islam are encouraged to take "Islamic," i.e. Arabic, names at the time of their conversion, and Muslim parents give Muslim names to their children. Finally, mention should be made of the extreme hostility Muslims have for anything approaching the historical-critical study of the Qur'an and of Islamic history. To this day, no Muslim has ever dared undertake a textual-critical study, or establish a "critical edition," such as has been done in New testament studies. Such a thing is inherently incompatible with the supposed supra-historical nature of the Qur'an and Islamic culture, and considered tantamount to kufr--"infidelity."

The depth of the antithesis between the Muslim and Christian worldviews is clear. Without going into the details at this point, it is nevertheless safe to say that, from the Biblical perspective, no culture, language, or "community" can claim any special divine status that puts them beyond investigation or makes them the standard by which everyone and everything else is judged. Such a claim stands in sharp conflict with the Christian doctrine of sin. From the Christian standpoint, the claim is blasphemous on two counts: it debases and dishonors God, and it exalts and indeed deifies mankind.

Deepening our Understanding of the Muslim Worldview

So far, our brief examination of the Muslim worldview has been somewhat like a two-dimensional drawing. Lest you be tempted to dismiss it too hastily, we now need to "look at the picture in three dimensions" to give it depth. We want to look at a number of historical factors that add important shades and nuances to the Muslim vision of community, and help explain why millions of Muslims are still captivated by this worldview today. This is not intended to be a historical study, but the historical perspective is necessary to help us gain a deeper understanding of the Muslim worldview and be able to relate to it in a credible way.

A first factor to be noted here is the long and brilliant history of Islamic civilization. Not only did the initial Muslim conquests of non-Muslim lands go forward at a rapid pace, but very early the Muslim world experienced a remarkable cultural flowering. By the tenth century it had become the center of world civilization, at a time when our ancestors in Europe were still uncivilized barbarians. Islamic civilization has demonstrated a remarkable resilience and has been able to absorb a wide variety of peoples and cultures. In the minds of most Muslims, these facts alone confirm the conviction that Islam is superior to other types of societies.

As Islamic civilization matured and spread, however, a gap appeared between the ideal Islam and the real. There were discrepancies between what the Community supposedly was in the days of the Prophet and how people themselves experienced it. For example, of all the Caliphs to rule as its temporal and spiritual leaders, only the first four are considered by Muslims to be "Rightly-Guided" (the *khulafā' rāshidūn*). Despite these failings, the Community continued strong for many years, and faith in the essential truth of the ideal remained intact. As we have already seen, although Muslims acknowledge the reality of sin, they believe mankind has the moral power not to sin. Confidence that the ideal Islam would ultimately prevail therefore remained high despite the discrepancies.

From about the fifteenth century on, however, Islam went into decline. The Muslims began to experience setbacks and lose territory, and the vast Muslim empire began to disintegrate. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Community experienced its darkest hour. Not only had the Muslim peoples become politically fragmented and economically underdeveloped; they now found themselves under the control of the Colonial powers. After the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924, there was no longer a "Successor" to the Prophet anywhere to rule the Community, as Muslim ideology requires.

One can readily understand the crisis of faith that was precipitated by this decline. In the Qur'an, God had seemed to promise the Muslims political power if they lived in submission to His Law. Sura 63:8 states that "might belongeth to Allah and to His messenger and the believers" (see also 24:55). To them this meant there should be, as in the days of Muhammad, a single united Community of Submission in full political control of its own destiny, and a center of world power. How was it then that they were now backward, hopelessly fragmented, and in subjection to non-Muslim powers? It was particularly galling to be ruled by "infidels" (*kuffār*).

The situation provoked considerable discussion as to why the Muslims were "backward," and what should be done about it. It seems that most agreed that "the fault does not lie with Islam itself but rather with the Muslim community." But beyond that, analyses differed considerably. Some felt that the Community had deviated from the "straight path" of submission exemplified by early Islam, and that God had therefore forsaken them. Others maintained that the problem was more in their antiquated perceptions of reality; the Muslims had stayed fixed on a medieval understanding of the world and had ceased to keep pace with modern civilization. Such differences in analysis naturally led to a wide variety of solutions; most attempted to

reform Islam one way or another, but a few more or less abandoned Islamic Law entirely.

It would seem that the Community had turned a corner around mid-century. In any case, in the decade following World War II, most Muslim countries became independent once again. Many of them adopted forms of government which maintain some continuity with Islamic Law but are patterned mainly on Western political models, especially socialism. Expectations were high that this would turn things around economically. Most of the constitutions declared Islam to be the "Religion of State," but at the most made the Shariah only a "main" source of legislation. Few have declared the Shariah to be the law of the land. One also finds the adoption of the Western concept of the Nation, which defines the nation in terms of citizenship rather than of religion, as in Islam. Secularism has likewise made inroads due to Western influence. All these things are in conflict with the Muslim ideal which envisages one united, worldwide Community of Submission, ruled by a recognized "Successor" of the Prophet. They were however accepted in hope of better things.

Now, a generation later, growing numbers of Muslims are becoming disillusioned with the grand experiment with Western models. Not only have expectations been unrealized, but the masses are as poor or poorer than before. Many Muslims feel that although their countries have gained independence, they are still not respected by the West, and are still being exploited and manipulated. There is a rising tide of anger and desperation to be reckoned with. The anger is directed, on the one hand, against their own governments which many Muslims feel have betrayed them. "Fundamentalists" are preaching that God is against them because they have followed Western values rather than those of Islam. Pressure is mounting for a "return to Islam" and to Islamic law. There is also an increasing tendency to blame the West for their problems. Many Muslims see a great "conspiracy against Islam" in the way the West, especially America, has treated the Muslim world; our handling of the Palestine situation and the Gulf crisis are but two examples. They also see the decadence of the West as further reason for rejecting Western models.

On the other hand, the fortunes of the Muslim world have experienced a marked improvement in recent years. God has seen fit to give it control over most of the world's oil reserves. The oil-producing Muslim countries have come to have considerable political and economic clout in the world, and are using it for the benefit of Islam. Then there is the rapid demographic growth of the Muslim population--they are now the fastest-growing block in the world, doubling every 24 to 30 years. Finally, Muslims have been experiencing considerable success in taking its message to the West--especially Europe and America. One can understand that many Muslims are confident that the tables will be turned, and that a united Muslim community will once be the dominant force in the world.

[To be continued in a future issue. Part Two will draw some conclusions relative to Christian witness among Muslims.]