

# Islam and Us

by George Cardinal Pell

Can Islam and the Western democracies live together peacefully? Optimists seize on the assurance of specialists that jihad is primarily a matter of spiritual striving and that the extension of this concept to terrorism is a distortion of koranic teaching. They emphasize Islam's self-description as a "religion of peace." They point to the roots Islam has in common with Judaism and Christianity and the worship the three great monotheistic religions offer to the one true God. There is also the common commitment that Muslims and Christians have to the family and to the defense of life, and the record of co-operation in recent decades between Muslim nations, the Holy See, and countries such as the United States in defending life.

Many commentators draw attention to the diversity of Muslim life—sunni, shi'ite, sufi, and their myriad variations—and the different forms that Muslim devotion can take in places such as Indonesia and the Balkans on the one hand, and Iran and Nigeria on the other. Stress is laid on the widely divergent interpretations of the Koran and shari'a, and the capacity Islam has shown throughout its history for developing new interpretations.

Optimists also take heart from the cultural achievements of Islam in the Middle Ages and the accounts of toleration extended to Jewish and Christian subjects of Muslim rule as "people of the Book." Some deny or minimize the importance of Islam as a source of terrorism, or of the problems that more generally afflict Muslim countries, blaming factors such as tribalism and inter-ethnic enmity; the long-term legacy of colonialism and Western domination; the way that oil revenues distort economic development in the rich Muslim states and sustain oligarchic rule; the poverty and political oppression in Muslim countries in Africa; the situation of the Palestinians, and the alleged "problem" of the state of Israel; and the way that globalization has undermined or destroyed traditional life and imposed alien values on Muslims and others.

Indonesia and Turkey are pointed to as examples of successful Muslim societies, and the success of countries such as Australia and the United States as "melting pots," creating stable and successful societies while absorbing people from different cultures and religions, is often invoked as a reason for trust and confidence in the growing Muslim populations in the West. The phenomenal capacity of modernity to weaken gradually the attachment of individuals to family, religion, and traditional ways of life, and to commodify and assimilate developments that originate in hostility to it, is also relied on to "normalize" Muslims in Western countries.

Reasons for optimism are also sometimes drawn from the totalitarian nature of Islamist ideology, and the brutality and rigidity of Islamist rule, exemplified in Afghanistan under the Taliban. Just as the secular Nazi and Communist totalitarianisms of the twentieth century proved unsustainable because of the enormous toll they exacted on human life and creativity, so too will the religious totalitarianism of radical Islam. This assessment draws on a more general underlying cause for hope: our common humanity. Most ordinary people, both Muslim and non-Muslim, share the desire for peace, stability and prosperity for themselves and their families.

On the pessimistic side of the equation, concern begins with the Koran itself. I started, in a recent reading of the Koran, to note invocations to violence—and abandoned the exercise after fifty or sixty pages, as there are so many of them. In coming to an appreciation of the true meaning of jihad, for example, it is important to bear in mind the difference between the suras written during Muhammad's thirteen years in Mecca and those written after he had based himself at Medina. Irenic interpretations of the Koran typically draw heavily on the suras written in Mecca, when Muhammad was without military power and still hoped to win people through preaching and religious activity. After emigrating to Medina, Muhammad formed an alliance with two Yemeni tribes and the spread of Islam through conquest and coercion began. One calculation is that Muhammad engaged in seventy-eight battles, only one of which, the Battle of the Ditch, was defensive. The suras from the Medina period reflect this decisive change.

The predominant grammatical form in which jihad is used in the Koran carries the sense of fighting or waging war. A different form of the verb in Arabic means "striving" or "struggling," and English translations sometimes use this form as a way of euphemistically rendering the Koran's incitements to war against unbelievers. But in any case, the so-called "verses of the sword" (sura 9:5 and 9:36), coming as they do in what scholars generally believe to be one of the last suras revealed to Muhammad, are taken to abrogate a large number of earlier verses on the subject (over 140, according to one radical website). The suggestion that jihad is primarily a matter of spiritual striving is also contemptuously rejected by some Islamic writers on the subject. One writer warns that "the temptation to reinterpret both text and history to suit 'politically correct' requirements is the first trap to be avoided," before going on to complain that "there are some Muslims today, for instance, who will convert jihad into a holy bath rather than a holy war, as if it is nothing more than an injunction to cleanse yourself from within."

The Christian and Jewish sources of the Koran are an important basis for dialogue and mutual understanding, although there are difficulties. Perhaps foremost among them is the understanding of God. It is true that Christianity, Judaism, and Islam claim Abraham as their father and the God of Abraham as their God. I accept, with reservations, the claim that Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship the same God, but this has been disputed, not only by Christians but by Muslims as well. It is difficult to recognize the God of the New Testament in the God of the Koran, and two very different concepts of the human person have emerged from the Christian and Muslim understandings of God. This has had significant consequences for the different cultures that Christianity and Islam have given rise to, and for the scope of what is possible within them.

The history of Muslim relations with Christians and Jews does not offer reasons for optimism in the way that some people easily assume. The claims of Muslim tolerance of Christian and Jewish minorities are largely mythical, as the history of Islamic conquest and domination in the Middle East, the Iberian peninsula, and the Balkans makes abundantly clear. In the territory of modern-day Spain and Portugal, which was ruled by Muslims from 716 and not finally cleared of Muslim rule until the surrender of Granada in 1491, Christians and Jews were tolerated only as dhimmis, subject to punitive taxation, legal discrimination, and a range of minor and major humiliations. If a dhimmi harmed a Muslim, his entire community would forfeit protection and be freely subject to pillage, enslavement, and murder. Harsh reprisals, including mutilations, deportations and crucifixions, were imposed on Christians who appealed for help to the Christian kings or who were suspected of having converted to Islam opportunistically. Raiding parties were sent out several times every year against the Spanish kingdoms in the north, and also against France and Italy, for loot and slaves. The caliph in Andalusia maintained an army of tens of thousand of Christian slaves from all over Europe, and

also kept a harem of captured Christian women. The Jewish community in the Iberian peninsula suffered similar sorts of discriminations and penalties, including restrictions on how they could dress. A pogrom in Granada in 1066 annihilated the Jewish population there and killed over five thousand people.

Arab rule in Spain and Portugal was a disaster for Christians and Jews, as was Turkish rule in the Balkans. The Ottoman conquest of the Balkans commenced in the mid-fifteenth century and was completed over the following two hundred years. Churches were destroyed or converted into mosques, and the Jewish and Christian populations became subject to forcible relocation and slavery. The extension or withdrawal of protection depended entirely on the disposition of the Ottoman ruler of the time. Christians who refused to apostatize were taxed and subject to conscript labor. Where the practice of the faith was not strictly prohibited, it was frustrated—for example, by making the only legal market day Sunday. Violent persecution was a constant threat. One scholar estimates that before the Greek war of independence in 1828, the Ottomans executed eleven patriarchs of Constantinople, nearly one hundred bishops, and several thousand priests, deacons and monks. Lay people were prohibited from practicing certain professions and trades, even sometimes from riding a horse with a saddle, and until the early eighteenth century their adolescent sons lived under the threat of the military enslavement and forced conversion which provided possibly one million janissary soldiers to the Ottomans during their rule. Under Byzantine rule the peninsula enjoyed a high level of economic productivity and cultural development. This was swept away by the Ottoman conquest and replaced with a general and protracted decline in productivity.

The history of Islam's detrimental impact on economic and cultural development returns us to the nature of Islam itself. For those of a pessimistic outlook this is probably the most intractable problem in considering Islam and democracy. What is the capacity for theological development within Islam?

In the Muslim understanding, the Koran comes directly from God, unmediated. Muhammad simply wrote down God's eternal and immutable words as they were dictated to him by the Archangel Gabriel. It cannot be changed, and to make the Koran the subject of critical analysis and reflection is either to assert human authority over divine revelation (a blasphemy) or to question its divine character. The Bible, in contrast, is a product of human co-operation with divine inspiration. It arises from the encounter between God and man, an encounter characterized by reciprocity, which in Christianity is underscored by a Trinitarian understanding of God. This gives Christianity a dynamic that not only favors the development of doctrine within strict limits, but also requires both critical analysis and the application of its principles to changed circumstances. It also requires a teaching authority.

Errors of fact, inconsistencies, and anachronisms in the Koran are not unknown to scholars, but it is difficult for Muslims to discuss these matters openly. In 2004 a scholar who writes under the pseudonym Christoph Luxenberg published a book in German setting out detailed evidence that the original language of the Koran was a dialect of Aramaic known as Syriac. Syriac or Syro-Aramaic was the written language of the Near East during Muhammad's time, and Arabic did not assume written form until 150 years after his death. Luxenberg argues that the Koran that has come down to us in Arabic is partially a mistranscription of the original Syriac. He suggests that the Koran has its basis in the texts of the Syriac Christian liturgy, and in particular in the Syriac lectionary, which provides the origin for the Arabic word "koran." As one scholarly review observed, if Luxenberg is correct the writers who transcribed the Koran into Arabic from Syriac a century and a half after Muhammad's death transformed it from a text that was "more or less harmonious with the New

Testament and Syriac Christian liturgy and literature to one that [was] distinct, of independent origin.” This is a large claim.

It is not surprising that much textual analysis is carried out pseudonymously. Death threats and violence are frequently directed against Islamic scholars who question the divine origin of the Koran. The call for critical consideration of the Koran, even simply of its seventh-century legislative injunctions, is rejected by hard-line Muslim leaders. Preaching recently to those making the hajj pilgrimage to Mount Arafat, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia told pilgrims that “there is a war against our creed, against our culture under the pretext of fighting terrorism. We should stand firm and united in protecting our religion. Islam’s enemies want to empty our religion [of] its content and meaning. But the soldiers of God will be victorious.”

Considered strictly on its own terms, Islam is not a tolerant religion, and its capacity for far-reaching renovation is severely limited. To stop at this proposition, however, is to neglect the way these facts are mitigated or exacerbated by the human factor. History has more than its share of surprises. Indonesia has been a successful democracy (with limitations) since its independence after World War II. Islam in Indonesia has been tempered significantly both by indigenous animism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, and also by the influence of sufism. As a consequence, in most of the country, Islam is syncretistic, moderate, and with a strong mystical leaning. This moderate Islam is sustained and fostered in particular by organizations like Nahdatul Ulama, which runs schools across the country, and which, with thirty or forty million members, is one of the largest Muslim organizations in the world.

The situation in Indonesia is quite different from that in Pakistan, the country with one of the largest Muslim populations in the world. Of Pakistani Muslims, 75 percent are Sunni, and most of these adhere to the relatively more liberal Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence. But religious belief in Pakistan is being radicalized because organizations, very different from Indonesia’s Nahdatul Ulama, have stepped in to fill the void in education created by years of neglect by military rulers. Pakistan spends only 1.8 percent of GDP on education, and 71 percent of government schools are without electricity, 40 percent are without water, and 15 percent are without a proper building. The population is only 42 percent literate, and this proportion is falling. Such neglect makes it easy for radical Islamic groups with funding from foreign countries to gain ground. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of religious schools (or madrasas) opening in Pakistan, and it is estimated that they are now educating perhaps 800,000 students.

Indonesia and Pakistan show that there is a range of factors affecting the prospects for a successful Islamic engagement with democracy. Peace and respect for human rights are the most desirable end points, but the development of democracy alone will not suffice. It is not enough to assume that giving people the vote will automatically favor moderation. In its influence on both religion and politics, the culture is crucial.

There are some who resist this conclusion vehemently. In 2002, the Nobel Prize Economist Amartya Sen argued that religion is no more important than any other part or aspect of human endeavor or interest. He also challenged the idea that within culture religious faith typically plays a decisive part in the development of individual self-understanding. Against this, Sen argued for a characteristically secular understanding of the human person, constituted above all else by sovereign choice. Each of us has many interests, convictions, connections, and affiliations, “but none of them has a unique and pre-ordained role in defining [the] person.” Rather, “we must insist on the liberty to see ourselves as

we would choose to see ourselves, deciding on the relative importance that we would like to attach to our membership in the different groups to which we belong. The central issue, in sum, is freedom.”

This does work for some people in the rich, developed Western world, particularly those without strong attachments to religion. Doubtless it has ideological appeal to many more among the elites. But as a basis for engagement with people of profound religious conviction, it is radically deficient. Sen’s words demonstrate that the high secularism of our elites is handicapped in comprehending the challenge that Islam poses.

I suspect one example of the secular incomprehension of religion is the blithe encouragement of large scale Islamic migration into Western nations, particularly in Europe. Of course they were invited to meet the need for labor and in some cases to assuage guilt for a colonial past.

If religion rarely influences personal behavior in a significant way then the religious identity of migrants is irrelevant. I suspect that some anti-Christians, for example, the Spanish Socialists, might have seen Muslims as a useful counterweight to Catholicism, another factor to bring religion into public disrepute. Probably too they had been confident that Western forces would be too strong for such a primitive religious viewpoint, which would melt down like much of European Christianity. This could prove to be a spectacular misjudgment.

During the Cold War, secularists, especially those who were repentant Communists, were well equipped to generate and sustain resistance to an anti-religious and totalitarian enemy. In the present challenge it is religious people who are better equipped to understand the situation with Islam. Radicalism has always had a way of filling emptiness, but if we are going to help the moderate forces within Islam defeat the extreme variants, we need to take seriously the personal consequences of religious faith. We also need to understand the secular sources of emptiness and despair and how to meet them, so that people will choose life over death. This is another place where religious people have an edge. Western secularists regularly have trouble understanding religious faith in their own societies, and are often at sea when it comes to addressing the meaninglessness that secularism spawns. An anorexic vision of democracy and the human person is no match for Islam.

The war against terrorism is only one aspect of the challenge. Perhaps more important is the struggle in the Islamic world between moderate forces and extremists, especially when we set this against the enormous demographic shifts likely to occur across the world, the relative changes in population-size of the West, the Islamic and Asian worlds and the growth of Islam in a childless Europe.

Every great nation and religion has shadows and indeed crimes in their histories. This is certainly true of Catholicism and of all Christian denominations. And it is legitimate to ask our Islamic partners in dialogue whether they believe that the peaceful suras of the Koran are abrogated by the verses of the sword. Is the program of military expansion to be resumed when possible? Do they believe that democratic majorities of Muslims in Europe would impose shari’a law? Can we discuss Islamic history and even the hermeneutical problems around the origins of the Koran without threats of violence?

Obviously some of these questions about the future cannot be answered, but the issues should be discussed. Useful dialogue means that participants grapple with the truth and in this issue of Islam and the West the stakes are too high for fundamental misunderstandings. Both Muslims and Christians are helped by accurately identifying what are core and enduring doctrines, by identifying

what issues can be discussed together usefully, by identifying those who are genuine friends, seekers after truth and cooperation and separating them from those who only appear to be friends.

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