



Islam: A Strategic Overview

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Contents

Introduction	1
Worldviews	2
Secularism and a Secular Telling of the Story of Islam	3
Islam and a Muslim Telling of the Story of Islam	4
Christianity and a Christian Telling of the Story of Islam	5
<i>Qur'an</i> and <i>Bible</i>	8
Islam – A Short History	9
Beginnings	9
The Muslim Empires	11
The Muslim Empires Crumble	11
Islam in the Modern World – Five Milestones	12
(1) 1918-1924 – End of the Caliphate	12
(2) 1945-1948 – Establishment of the State of Israel	13
(3) 1979 – Iranian Revolution, Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, Siege of Mecca	13
(4) 1988 – Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan	14
(5) 1990-1991 – Fall of USSR and First Gulf War	14
Muslims in the UK	14
Muslim Perceptions in the UK – Two Challenges to Christians	15
Responses	15
Public Witness	15
Prayer	17
Bibliography	18
Author Information	21
Acknowledgements	22
Enquiry Contact Information	22

Introduction

This is not a guide to Islamic Belief and Practice. It will not, for example, cover the six articles of Islamic faith, nor the five pillars of Islamic practice. These are well covered in any number of introductory books (e.g. Chatrath 2011) and booklets (e.g. Sookhdeo 2010; Steer 2003) Instead the focus here is on the bigger picture – the great governing stories about “life, the universe and everything” – that are covered very poorly in most of the literature.

Christians all know chapter 11 in the New Testament book *Hebrews* – the great passage about Old Testament heroes of faith.

But here is the question: Who is mentioned first?

Answer: We are! – see verses 1-2 and verse 6. An underlying message is that faith is basic to everything and to everyone. For every human being it is never a matter of *whether* there is faith at work, but only a question of *which* faith? *whose* faith?

The great stories desperately matter because:

- there is no neutral area of life – every aspect of our life is embedded in one or another (or some mixture) of great stories.
- fundamentally they are religious, or faith stories. From now on we will call them *worldview stories*, because ‘faith’ is often limited to religious people (Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims *etc.*) whereas *everyone* is governed by these faith stories, even those who claim to be ‘secular’ or ‘not religious’.
- the commitment to these worldview stories will have serious consequences – for good or ill – for understanding, and for the individual, community and wider society.

Worldviews

A person’s or community’s *worldview* is their faith. Worldviews are not primarily intellectual or academic. They are our default setting, how we live and act automatically even when we are not thinking. Every worldview is story-formed. In Britain (and the Western world in general) there are three worldview stories we must consider, those of Western Secularism, of Christianity, and of Islam. But if we designate the religion as ‘Islam’, then the relevant worldview is better designated as ‘Islamism’ – militant, political Islam.

In this paper the focus is on Islam (Islamism), so let me emphasise that the greatest danger facing Christianity is actually from within, from our own Western Secularism. Let me recommend Os Guinness’ book *A Free People’s Suicide* (Guinness 2012). Two Quotations must suffice here. He is writing about the USA, but his words apply equally to Europe, including Britain:

If the founders were correct, contemporary America’s pursuit of political leadership without character, economic enterprise without ethics and trust, scientific progress without human values, freedom without virtue and negative freedom without positive freedom can end only in disaster. It rings the death knell of sustainable freedom, and as it works itself out socially and politically in countless areas, it makes the decline of America only a matter of time.

(Guinness 2012: 34)

There is no question about the earlier menace of the Nazis and Communists, and now Islamic extremists, but in the end the ultimate threat to the American

republic will be Americans. The problem is not wolves at the door but termites in the floor. Powerful free people die only by their own hand, and free people have no one to blame but themselves. What the world seems fascinated to watch but powerless to stop is the spectacle of a free people's suicide.

(Guinness 2012: 36-37)

Back to the worldview stories. There is no neutral telling of these stories. Each story will be different depending on whether a Secularist, Christian or Muslim is telling it. In particular there is no one 'Story of Islam' but Secular, Muslim and Christian tellings of the story (it is, of course, even more complicated than that, but for a short overview we have to simplify.) There are also no neutral meanings of the key worldview terms – the 'same' term (e.g. 'peace', 'justice', 'freedom') will have different meanings in the different worldview contexts. We certainly need true evidence, but it will speak the truth only in the context of a true story. Establishing the truth of the latter is as important as establishing the truth of the former.

Secularism and a Secular Telling of the Story of Islam

There are many secular worldview Stories, but in the Western world today the dominant secular Story is that of *Materialism*, with a close linking of the two meanings of that key word (see Jones 2013a, 2013b for more detailed discussion):

- *Materialism1* – physical nature is all there is;
- *Materialism2* (aka the *Western Religion*) – enjoying material possessions is all that matters.

The secular worldview Story, like the Christian Gospel, makes an absolute claim on the whole of life:

Secularists will *exclude* from any story they tell ...

- God,
- faith,
- miracles,
- ultimate purpose,
- objective moral order,
- ultimate meaning.

They will begin the story of Islam with Muhammad and explain the history solely in terms of ...

- environmental,
- biological,
- psychological,
- social, and,
- economic factors.

This secularist prejudice has serious consequences, as Os Guinness explains:

Islam is not a monolith and Islam as a whole is not fighting either the West or the Christian faith. But Osama bin Laden and the Islamists are self-consciously fighting a religious war (“This war is fundamentally religious ... Those who try to cover this crystal-clear fact ... are deceiving the Islamic nation” [bin Laden, 2001]), and they see themselves confronting a modern world both created and represented by an explicitly religious enemy (“World Christianity, which is allied with Jews and Zionism” [bin Laden 1998]). So when the West, which has outgrown the Christian label and no longer recognizes the heart of the conflict as religious, insists instead that the roots of the war lie in poverty, lack of education, the results of foreign policy, and the impact of globalization, it is fighting at cross-purposes with its enemy and prone to misunderstandings and blunders. (Guinness 2008: 32-33)

So how will Muslims tell their story?

Islam and a Muslim Telling of the Story of Islam

Muslims have a Worldview Story of Paradise, Departure, Return, and Paradise Regained.

Paradise – We live in a world created and controlled by Allah (God) with Islam as the original and true religion. Adam and Eve were created in a heavenly, spiritual Garden that is not on Earth. They are relegated to Earth after they disobey God’s command.

Departure – Humans are weak (not sinful) - they are capable of living a pure life by proper devotion and obedience to Allah’s way for all of life (the *Qur’an*, *Shari’ah* Law etc.) But they have departed from Allah’s way. (NB shame/honour takes precedence, rather than guilt.)

Return – By act of will (not grace) we can live a sinless life. We must obey Allah, by accepting the teaching of Muhammad, following the way of life he exemplified (*Sunna*) and submitting to Allah’s Law (*Shari’ah*). We must bear witness to the truth of Islam and support mission (*dawa*) – which can be accomplished through persuasion, but also, when necessary, through violent *jihād*. Non-Muslim societies will become Muslim and at the end of Earthly history there will be one universal Muslim community (*‘Umma*) and one global civil and religious rule (caliphate) under Islamic (*Shari’ah*) law.

Paradise Regained – After the Day of Judgment, true Muslims will enter a heavenly paradise. There is no renewal of the Earthly creation. There is also no assurance of salvation in this life. Hence the appeal of martyrdom which is seen as guaranteeing entry to paradise.

Don’t forget that – as for every worldview – the Muslim worldview sets out the basic worldview categories (or basic assumptions) of their great story. It acts as a systematic shorthand representation, or reminder, of the story, *but it is not the story itself*. The Muslim story itself is much richer, being filled out by all the information that can be gleaned from the Qur’an and Hadith (traditions that Muslims believe can

be traced back to Muhammad and his companions) and from Muslim experience down through history.

Muslims will begin their story with Allah (God) and with Adam. Adam and Eve are presented as the first Muslims, who (according to most Muslim historians) spoke Aramaic. Many of the familiar Old Testament saints – Noah, Abraham, Moses, David *etc.* – are regarded as Muslim prophets. Even Alexander the Great (really!) is described as a Muslim prophet. Jesus is seen as another human Muslim prophet – and a great one – but Muhammad is seen as the last and greatest of the prophets.

It must again be emphasised that there is no neutral position, in this instance no neutral saint. For example, there is no neutral Abraham for Jew, Christian, Muslim or Secularist. For each faith, Abraham's identity is understood as it is revealed in the context of the relevant worldview story. In this sense, too, the Allah ('God') of the Muslim is not the same as the Allah of the (Arabic-speaking) Christian.

Despite the worldview rejection of any temporal or spatial limits to Islamic history, and probably because of their doctrines of creation and eschatology (the worldview story beginning and ending in a heavenly paradise – no renewal of earthly creation), there is no reflection in Islam of the Bible's celebration and nurture of all the different aspects of ordinary daily life. For example, there is only a limited development of the aesthetic – *e.g.* as regards images of people and of the natural world, and as regards music, singing and dance. Muslim scholars have also generally shown little interest in world history (outside Islam) or in the history of the Islamic regions before Muhammad.

A final important point is that, in Islam, it has rarely been the theologians who have been a major influence, but rather the legal experts (jurists). Faithful Muslims want to know how to correctly conform to the law of Allah in their daily lives. And for this the jurists turn to the Hadith traditions, not the Qur'an.

But how should Christians tell the story of Islam?

Christianity and a Christian Telling of the Story of Islam

For Christians, the goal of mission is life-long disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, who disciple others. To be a disciple is to participate in the unfolding great Christian story (or *drama*), which centres in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But where does the story of Islam belong in the Christian story?

In practice Christians have usually been captured by the modern secular worldview and tell much the same story as the secular scholars. But shouldn't we expect a Christian telling of the history of Islam to be different?

A Christian telling of history means bringing our own life story into connection with the story of our family, community (communities), society and people back through history until it can be brought into connection with the great Biblical story. The whole story is then told in the light of that Biblical story. Each larger context provides the

interpretative framework for the more restricted contexts and ultimately the Biblical context provides the largest and truest interpretative context of all.

The Christian worldview can be summarised in the traditional Creation → Fall → Redemption → New Creation storyline:

Creation – We live in God’s world – an amazing world that reveals God’s wisdom and glory. The first humans were created in God’s image, called to serve his world and to develop its rich potential, so that, through them and their offspring, God’s kingdom might be extended throughout the Earth until it is filled with His knowledge and glory.

Fall – But we rebelled against God, broke the covenant, spoilt the Earth.

Redemption – God set out to restore the world and redeem his human subjects that they might again live under his gracious rule. The commission passed to Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and to Israel and its kings, but none could perfectly fulfil the calling. But throughout there ran a promise that one would come who would do so. Thus Jesus came – God Himself incarnated as a human being – as the goal of this redemptive story, claiming that in His person and work the meaning of history and of the world itself was being made known and accomplished. From that point on *all* people must find their place and meaning within *His* story, for there is no other source of true meaning. We are saved by Christ from sin and death in order to follow His ways and do what is good. In other words we are in this world for a threefold purpose: for relationship with God – to love and serve him – for relationship with one another – to love our neighbour as we love ourselves – and for ruling the Earth that we might develop it for God’s glory.

New Creation – We look forward to a fully restored and renewed creation. Today we live in the End Times – God’s new creation has begun! Our churches are colonies of heaven – revealing God’s kingly rule over all of life in all the world to His ultimate glory. The establishing of God’s kingdom in Christ is the ultimate goal of world history.

We know all this by revelation from God and from our life’s experience of living before Him in His world.

Thus a Christian history of Islam must locate the story of Islam within the framework of the Biblical story (see Maalouf 2003).

Remember that – as with Islam – the Christian worldview *is not the story itself*. The Biblical and Christian story is much, much richer. For a good overview of those riches see: Bartholomew & Goheen 2006, Goheen & Bartholomew 2008, and, for some in-depth exploration, see Beale 2011, Billings 2010, Goheen 2011, Vanhoozer 2005, Wright 2006, 2010 and Wright 2012. Also the story concerns us in our wholeness – as embodied people – not just minds – see Smith 2009, 2013.

So a Christian history of Islam will obviously begin with God. But where will it begin in Biblical history?

Islam began amongst the Arabs, so where do we locate them in the Bible story?

Arabs are the descendants of Joktan (*Genesis* 10:25-30), accounting for the South Arabian stock; the descendants of Ishmael, Abraham's firstborn (*Genesis* 25:12-18), accounting for the north Arabian tribes; and the descendants of Abraham through Keturah (*Genesis* 25:1-6), which mostly populated central Arabia. Thus In a broad sense 'Arabia' includes Sinai, Palestine and Syria and modern Islamists like Osama bin Laden regard all three of Islam's holiest shrines (in Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem) as lying within an Arabia which belongs to Islam.

By the end of the first millennium BC, Ishmael's descendants had become dominant in north and central Arabia and over time most parts of the peninsula identified with them regardless of the precise ethnic origins (Maalouf 2003: 20-21). Thus it is the story of Ishmael that we must look to in the Bible.

In the Bible (*Genesis* 16 and 21), whilst the inheritance and messianic promise belong to Isaac, Hagar and Ishmael are still recipients of God's special care, grace and mercy:

- Hagar is the first person in the Bible to be visited by an angel (*Genesis* 16: 7).
- The Angel of the LORD – God himself (the pre-incarnate Christ according to a common tradition) – appears to her (*Genesis* 16: 7, Maalouf 2003: 62-63).
- God calls Hagar – a female, a servant – by name (*Genesis* 16: 8); in the narrative, no one else, not even her own husband, Abraham, does so. "This beautiful story establishes the dignity of women, including the Arab daughters of Hagar and all Muslim women." (Miller 2012: 230)
- She is the only person who dares to give a name to God (*El Roi* 'The God who sees me', *Genesis* 16: 13).
- It is the first birth annunciation from heaven in Biblical history.
- She is the only woman in the Bible to receive a divine promise of descendants (*Genesis* 16: 10; 21: 18).
- There is a context of divine appointment: "when the direct object is a person with God as the subject, the verb *matza*' ("to find" [*Genesis* 16: 7]) "carries a technical meaning going well beyond connotations of the English verb: it includes elements of encounter and of divine election"" (Maalouf 2003: 62, quoting McEvenue).
- Ishmael is one of only four people [Isaac, Ishmael, Josiah and Solomon] in the Old Testament, who are named before birth.
- The name Ismael means 'God hears', declaring God's care for him (*Genesis* 16: 11; 21: 17).
- God intervenes to save Ishmael from death (*Genesis* 21: 17-20).
- God gives Ishmael promises of blessing in the wilderness (*Genesis* 16: 9-12; 21: 18)

In later Biblical history the Arabs are known as Arabians, Ishmaelites and Children of the East.

Job was a Son of the Arabian Desert. Indeed the book of Job provides evidence that, despite the widespread polytheism in the Arabian tribes, there was a wholesome Abrahamic monotheistic tradition that was never extinguished (*c.f.* Abimelech, *Genesis* 20). The *Song of Solomon* reflects desert culture and Arabian love poetry and *Proverbs* chapters 30 and 31 reveal that Agur, Lemuel and his mother were north Arabian sages who came to knowledge of God through Israel, probably during the time of the United Kingdom. The magi in Matthew's Gospel were almost certainly from Arabia. There were Jews from Arabia – natives and proselytes – in Jerusalem at Pentecost (*Acts* 2: 11). Thus the gospel message travelled with them back to Arabia. Paul went first to Arabia in response to his calling to preach among the nations (*Galatians* 1: 15-17).

We will conclude this short summary with three key passages of Scripture. In his speech at the *Areopagus* in Athens (*Acts* 17: 22-31), the apostle Paul reminds us that God is sovereign over history and that, above and beyond all historical factors, it is God who determines the time and place for every people (*Acts* 17:26). Thus it is God who brought the Muslims to Britain and He did so that they “would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him” (*Acts* 17: 27 NIV 2011).

In *Leviticus* 19: 18 and 33-34, God commands His people to love their neighbours as they love themselves, but also to love foreigners as themselves and treat them as native-born. In fact *Deuteronomy* 10:18 tells us that “the LORD your God ... shows no partiality ... and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing” (NIV 2011). Jesus extends this universally, by telling us to love even our enemies (*Matthew* 5: 43-48; *Luke* 6: 27-36; *cf.* *Romans* 12: 14-21) and that only by doing so can we be like our heavenly Father (*Matthew* 5: 48). Jesus and Stephen showed this in practice (*Luke* 23: 34; *Acts* 7: 60).

Finally *Revelation* 7: 9-10 tells us that people from every nation, tribe, people and language will be amongst the saved in God's New Creation.

Qur'an and Bible

The status of the *Qur'an* in Islam (Divine, eternal) is that of Jesus in Christianity. Many of the Biblical characters are in the Muslim *Qur'an*, and the longest continuous narrative is a version of the Joseph story (*Surah* 12). But most of the *Qur'an* is not in story form and contains little detail. We encourage Muslims to read the *Qur'an* in a language they understand, but tell them that they will need to read the *Bible* to get the full stories. Because of its story form, the *Bible* is much easier to read and understand. If Muslims read the *Qur'an* for themselves they will also discover how significant Jesus is in comparison with Muhammad. Jesus is a holy, sinless figure in the *Qur'an*, whereas Muhammad's sense of sin and need of mercy, grace and forgiveness is clear in several passages. The sense of sin is a key point of entry to the Muslim heart. The dark side of both Muhammad's life and of Islam is also there in the *Qur'an* (the violence, deceit, polygamy *etc.*).

Rather than telling a coherent, developing story, the *Qur'an* is a book of signs to guide people into the truth path of submission to Allah. The *Bible* is also full of signs that are picked up, carried forward and extended. Many of them are recorded in the

Qur'an. But in the *Qur'an* they ultimately don't go anywhere. In the *Qur'an* they are not fulfilled in Muhammad's life, nor in the life of anyone else. In the *Bible* all of them point forward to, and are fulfilled in, Jesus Christ. For example,

- The sign of the Image of God
- The sign of God's spoken Word
- The sign of creation out of nothing by God's Word
- The sign of God's Spirit
- The sign of Sabbath Rest
- The sign of King and Kingdom
- The sign of a Servant Ruler
- The sign of Covenant
- The sign of Tabernacle and Temple
- The sign of Sacrifice
- The sign of Circumcision
- The sign of Baptism (passing through water)
- The sign of the Communal Meal (sacred food and drink)
- The sign of Blessing
- The sign of Forgiveness
- The sign of the Law (Torah)
- The sign of Priest and Priesthood
- The sign of Eldership and Apostleship
- The sign of Marriage
- The sign of Nakedness and Clothing
- *etc. etc.*

Islam – A Short History

Beginnings

The earliest accounts of Muhammad's life were written at least 150 years after his death and are all Muslim in origin. There is no non-Muslim confirmation of the events and they are shrouded in uncertainty. So what follows is based largely on the Muslim telling of the story.

Muhammad was born in the wealthy merchant town of Mecca in AD 570 (some say 571). Orphaned at an early age, he came under the care of his uncle (Abū Tālib), the head of the prestigious Hāshem clan. In about 595 he was employed by Khadija, a wealthy widow to manage her camel caravan trade. He so impressed her that she offered marriage. She was then about 40 and he only 25, but it was a happy marriage producing 6 children (only a daughter, Fatima, survived). After Khadija's death (in 619) he married a further twelve wives. (For Islam this sanctioned polygamy.)

By his marriage he became important and could devote himself to religious meditation. When about 40 (c 610) he became very concerned about the paganism of his countrymen. In a cave on Mt Hira (c. 3 miles from Mecca) he claimed to receive revelations from God or from the arch-angel Gabriel. Jewish and Christian

communities had settled in Arabia and Muhammad drew (presumably orally) on Jewish and Christian teaching. The knowledge he gained of Jewish and Christian thought was superficial and mixed orthodoxy and heresy. At first he probably saw his mission to convey this teaching to the Arabs. At this time the Muslims faced Jerusalem in prayer.

In 615 Muhammad sent some of his followers to the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) where they were well received and returned to share with Muhammad their admiration for the emperor and his faith. It is entirely possible that throughout this 'Meccan' stage Muhammad was seeking to respond to a genuine call from God. But, if so, that was soon to change. In about 619 his uncle died and Muhammad lost the protection of the clan. In 622 he took his followers 250 miles north to Medina. (Medina was then called *Yathrib*. Medina means 'city', i.e. the prophet's own city.)

In Medina a radical change took place. Muhammad began attacking the Meccan camel caravans and divided the booty to his men. Not surprisingly he became popular with the local Arab tribes. Muhammad's emphasis was shifting to political and military domination. So at the beginning, the claim that 'Islam is peace' held for barely 13 years – instead of being a prophet of peace, Muhammad now became primarily a politician, legislator and judge. War on religious grounds was sanctioned and *jihad* ('holy war') became not only acceptable, but a religious duty for Muslims when Islam is under threat. For Radical Muslims the Medinan period is the true model. They argue that Muhammad did not resort to arms in Mecca for purely tactical reasons – it was then not possible for him to impose his rule by force. But in Medina he had no hesitation in fighting his enemies, including those who simply did not accept his message.

At first Jews and Christians had been sympathetic, but this soon ended. Around 624 he broke with the Jews, asserting instead the specifically Arabian character of Islam. From now on Muslims were commanded to face the Kaaba at Mecca in prayer. [This may not be true: the direction of prayer in early mosques remained towards Jerusalem until some time after Muhammad]. Muhammad went on to expel two Jewish communities from Medina and in 627 he beheaded all (hundreds) of the men in another. In 630 he turned against Christians, too, when Christian tribes near Syria opposed him during a raid. In Mecca Muhammad was morally upright and did not engage in robbery, violence, or polygamy. In Medina by his own choice he engaged in all three. His Medinan life was not an example to be followed.

Christianity also has an undeniably chequered history that includes military crusades, inquisitions, indifference to evil, slave trading and forcible conversion. However, as Roy Clouser (pers comm 07 April 2003) has pointed out, the issue here is not what may have happened, but what is taught as normative by the scriptures of each tradition and by the example set by the founder of each. In every tradition of belief, people fail to live up to the normative teachings. But as long as there are the resources within those traditions for judging and correcting those failures, the tradition is strengthened, not undermined. As regards Christianity, none of these things has warrant in the New Testament: there is absolutely no support for them anywhere in the teachings of Jesus or the Apostles. For Islam, the problem is not so much interpreting the Qur'anic passages that appear to support these things, but the example of Muhammad

who raided, robbed, enslaved, was polygamous and engaged in forced conversions. Can Islam free itself from the idea of world conversion by world conquest unless it is willing to admit that what Muhammad did was wrong?

Within 8 years Arabia was under Muhammad's control, but he died shortly afterwards in AD 632. The Arab advance continued unabated and by 656 the boundaries of conquest had reached Afghanistan in the East, Libya in the West and the Caucasus mountains in the North. In these early times there is little indication that it was seen as an advance of Islam and no attempt was made to convert conquered non-Arab peoples. It appears that Islam was seen as a religion for Arabs, not for all peoples. The advance was not halted in the West until AD 732 near Poitiers in France by Charles Martel. Further south, Christianity was almost wiped out in North Africa; only the Copts in Egypt survived. In the East, the Arab armies continued to advance, entering China by AD 750. Increasing numbers of non-Arabs turned to Islam, but it was not until about 150 years after Muhammad's death (c 800 AD) that the equality of Arab and non-Arab Muslims became generally accepted (Lewis 1993: 87).

The Muslim Empires

During the first six centuries AD Christianity spread through the known world. After 622 Muslim rule began to take its place everywhere outside of Europe and there was a succession of great Muslim empires: the Umayyad Caliphate (AD 661-750, whose Capital was Damascus; the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258, whose Capital was Baghdad – hence the importance of Iraq to Muslims); the Mamluk Sultanate (1250-1517, Capital Cairo, mainly Egypt and Syria, absorbed into the Ottoman Empire in 1516-17) and the Ottoman Caliphate (1300-1922, Capital Istanbul). In the tenth century Baghdad was the largest and most important city in the world, followed by Cordoba in Muslim Spain. In later centuries the imperial centre was Istanbul. By 1700 Islam had dominated the known world for 1000 years. It was the greatest military power on Earth during that period; it controlled world trade; it was wealthier than its neighbours; its cities were more glorious; its buildings more splendid; its literature and art subtle and powerful; it excelled in astronomy, maths and medicine; its philosophers and lawyers were skilled and brilliant. Islam, not Christian Europe, was the bridge between the ancient East and the modern west (though it must be remembered that in the early Muslim centuries Christians were a majority in large parts of the Muslim world and many Christian scholars were employed by the Muslim rulers – see Griffith 2010). For Muslims of the time this was as it should be – history confirmed what the Qur'an foretold.

The Muslim Empires Crumble

The expansion of Islam cut off the great trade routes for Europe to the East and turned the Mediterranean into a Muslim sea. Jewish and Christian peoples joined the new Arab culture and helped the Muslims develop a new society under Arab patronage. Europe went through a time of decay and stagnation, but, partly fuelled by contact with Islam through Spain and North Africa, recovered into the periods we know as the Renaissance and Enlightenment. There were strong developments in philosophy, mathematics, astronomy and other sciences.

By the late 14th century, Christian Venice had become the centre of the developing world. In 1492 the last Muslim kingdom in Spain (Granada) was defeated by Ferdinand and Isabella. That same year those two monarchs sent Columbus off to the New World – although they didn't, of course, know of it at the time. By the 1550s Antwerp had become the centre of the developing world, followed by Amsterdam in the 1600s. In 1683 the Muslim eastern advance into Europe was finally and decisively halted at Vienna on September 12th (probably why September 11th was chosen in 2001 – turning the clock back to the days of Muslim world advance). After the 17th century Islam steadily lost territory and by the 19th century the era of Western imperialism was well underway. France, England, Russia, Holland, Spain, Portugal and even Germany carved up the Islamic world. From the late 18th century London became the developing world centre (until New York took over in the 1920s). By 1912 all of North Africa had come under European rule and in 1918 Islam finally lost all control in Europe. By 1918 more than 90% of the Muslim world was under European 'Christian' rule. Only Turkey, Iran (Persia), Afghanistan & Saudi Arabia were independent. Turkey under Ataturk and Iran under Shah Pahlavi became secularised and Westernised; Afghanistan was poor, fragmented and remote. Only Saudi Arabia was left, the heartland of Islam.

Today Muslim countries have regained their independence: the new country of Pakistan (including present-day Bangladesh) in 1947, Indonesia in 1949, all of North Africa by 1962, Iran in 1979 (the Revolution in which Ayatollah Khomeini toppled the Shah), the Russian '-stans' (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan *etc*) in 1991. But although Muslim countries are again independent they are still dominated politically, militarily, economically and culturally by the West.

How can this be? The Muslim worldview story expects history to move forward to one global civil and religious rule (caliphate) under Islamic (shari'a) law. How, then, can Allah's people come to their present state? The dominant Muslim response is to attribute this parlous state to the infidelity of Muslims: too many Muslims have become impure, corrupted by the secularism and materialism of the Western world. The answer is to restore Islam to the purity it enjoyed in the time of Muhammad and his companions.

Five milestones of the past century are key to understanding this diagnosis and the response (Gorka & Sookhdeo 2012: 193-198).

Islam in the Modern World – Five Milestones

(1) 1918-1924 – End of the Caliphate

The significance of the First World War should not be under-estimated. Until then there was a central legal and spiritual authority in the Muslim world. Latterly that authority rested with the Caliph of the Ottoman Empire in Istanbul. In 1924, Ataturk (Mustafa Kemal), the first President of Turkey, formally dissolved the religious empire (Caliphate) of Islam. The declaration that Turkey was to be secular, with a strict separation of religion from politics, shocked the entire Muslim world. For modern Islamists like Osama bin Laden this was a key turning point of history understood as the collapse of the Islamic world (*ummah*) in the face of "Christendom", a collapse to

be explained by Muslims' apostasy from Islam and which can be reversed only by returning to an Islamist version of Islam (see Marshall 2006).

Since 1924 there has been no central Islamic authority and different Muslim factions have vied for power. Although Saudi Arabia was the historical heartland of Islam, it was an intellectual backwater until the 1960s and its dominant form of Islam – *Wahhabism* – was globally insignificant. *Wahhabism* (founded in the 18th century) describes itself as *Salafist* (*i.e.* as following the *Salaf*, the early followers of Muhammad, regarded as exemplars of Islamic practice). It is austere, literalist and intolerant, but, with Saudi Arabia using its enormous oil wealth to fund Wahhabi institutions throughout the world, it has become a dominant force.

Another important Islamist group is the *Muslim Brotherhood* (founded in Egypt in 1928). It is one of the largest Islamist movements and forms the main political opposition in many Arab states.

(2) 1945-1948 – Establishment of the State of Israel

World War 2 brought another shock. In 1945 the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust did not wish to return to their homes in Europe. At the same time Palestine was a mandate territory under the British who were regularly attacked and wanted to withdraw. It was suggested that the land be given to the Jews. The Arabs failed to block the move and so in 1948 Muslims saw the Arab leaders lose Palestine and a Jewish State established at the heart of the Muslim world. The defeat of the Arab armies by Israel in the 1967 'Six Day War' was then seen by Muslims and Arabs as one of the lowest points they had ever reached.

(3) 1979 Iranian Revolution, Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, Siege of Mecca

This is the most important milestone. Interestingly, 1979 was actually 1399 on the Muslim calendar, with great expectation at the coming of the 15th century. Three very significant things did happen.

- (1) The Iranian Revolution reintegrated religion and politics. This is exactly what is happening in the 'Arab Spring', but Iran led the way in 1979. The separation accomplished by Ataturk in 1924 was undone, becoming a model for Sunni as well as Shia Muslims.
- (2) The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan brought a call to Jihad that mobilised radical Muslims from around the Muslim world, including a Saudi national, Osama bin Laden.
- (3) In Saudi Arabia, on the very first day of the new century (1st of Muharram 1400 = 20 November 1979) several hundred well-armed jihadists, with the support of some Saudi clerics, captured the Grand Mosque in Mecca. They believed King Khalid was an apostate who must be removed from power and Islam purified. They held the mosque for almost two weeks. Eventually a small group of French commandos (formally 'converted' to Islam) helped the Saudis retake the Mosque. The clerics who had supported the Jihadists accepted a deal from the King: propagating jihadi ideology overseas would be condoned,

as long as it was never again allowed to threaten the House of Saud or Saudi Arabia.

(4) 1988 – Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan

Osama bin Laden and his 50,000 mujahidin believed that they had defeated a super-power, which collapsed just three years later. The Holy Warriors of Islam had destroyed it, because Allah was on their side.

(5) 1990-1991 – Fall of the USSR and First Gulf War

The First Gulf War started with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. Bin Laden went to King Fahd of Saudi Arabia and offered his Holy Warriors to protect his homeland from the apostate secular dictator, Saddam Hussein. The king rejected his (unrealistic) offer and asked the US to protect the two holy sites (Mecca and Medina). To bin Laden this was an insult and a matter of very great shame. First it was the French commandos and now US soldiers (“infidels” “Zionist Crusaders”) were being stationed in the ‘Holy Land’ of Arabia. Osama bin Laden describes this as:

“one of the worst catastrophes to befall the Muslims since the death of the Prophet ... the occupation of the land of the two holy mosques [Saudi Arabia], the cradle of Islam, the scene of the revelation, the source of the message, and the site of the holy Ka’bah, the qiblah of all Muslims [to which they turn in prayer], by Christian armies of the Americans and their allies.” (bin Laden 1996. See Ezra 2012, Marshall 2006).

This was a last straw: bin Laden created the *al Qaeda* we know today and within two years (26 February 1993) the first World Trade Center attack occurred in New York.

The Muslim jihadists are not motivated primarily by particular events, neither ancient crusades nor modern invasions, but by their religion.

Muslims in the UK

The first mention of Islam in Britain concerns Offa of Mercia (died 796), a powerful Anglo-Saxon King who had coins minted with the inscription of the *kalimah* in Arabic, indicating commercial ties with Muslims in Spain, France and North Africa. The first records of Muslims living in Britain date from the 16th century and by the 19th there were Muslim seamen settled in most ports of England and Scotland.

By 1915 there were about 10,000 Muslims in the UK. The population slowly increased to about 23,000 by 1951. In the 1950s Muslim immigrants, mainly men, came from India and Pakistan (after partition and independence). This immigration was encouraged because of the labour shortages in the steel and textile industries of Yorkshire and Lancashire. There was a big surge in immigration in the 1960s, boosted by people hurrying to beat the Commonwealth Immigrants Act (1962) which ended the right of automatic entry to the UK for Commonwealth citizens. Other Muslim immigrants came from East Africa (mainly Kenya and Uganda) where many Asians were suffering discrimination. In 1972 Idi Amin expelled Asians from Uganda

and many settled in Britain. The UK Muslim population increased from about 82,000 in 1961 to 369,000 in 1971, 600,000 in 1980, 1 million by 1990, 1,100,000 by 1995, 1,600,000 (2.7%) in 2001, and 2.7m (5%) in the 2011 census. The census figures are probably an under-estimate; the true figure today may be above 3million. The numbers of Christians are expected to decline sharply over coming decades, whereas figures for the non-religious and Muslims are expected to increase substantially.

South Asians in the UK comprise: Indians (45% Hindu; 30% Sikh; 12% Muslim; 5% Christian); Pakistanis (92% Muslim; 1.1% Christian); and Bangladeshis (92% Muslim; 0.5% Christian). In other words, of the South Asians in the UK, 95% of the Indians, 98.9% of the Pakistanis and 99.5% of the Bangladeshis, do not know Jesus Christ.

Muslim Perceptions in the UK – Two Challenges to Christians

The first challenge comes from Muslim leaders. They commonly comment that there is no distinctive Christian presence in Britain: “British Christianity is largely a private Sunday diversion for those who are otherwise indistinguishable from their pagan and materialistic neighbours.” (see, e.g. Sardar 1991, Siddiqui 1989, for such critiques).

The second challenge to Christians is that the major barrier to Muslims coming to Christ is the absence of a Christian community that they could join: “If I become a Christian, I will lose a community, but gain only meetings.”

Responses

Public Witness

In his article on Islamism, Paul Marshall (2006) reminds us of Lesslie Newbigin’s central claim:

“As the late Lesslie Newbigin insisted, Christianity is public truth [Newbigin 1991, 1992]. Islamism makes public claims for the truth of Islam. Christians must counter with public claims for the truth of the teachings of the Bible. The gospel is not proclaimed in vain, and the present and next generations must proclaim it in every sphere of human life and every geographical area of the earth with both humility and courage.”

The first thing we must do in response to Islam, as Christians, is to shake off the Western secular religion and become truly Christian – living as authentically Christian communities with authentically Christian cultures.

Lesslie Newbigin has indeed said it best:

“The explosion of Muslim wrath [over the 1988 Salman Rushdie book *The Satanic Verses*] ought to be seen by Christians as a sharp word from the Lord about our failure to challenge the public life of our society with the Gospel ... a

nation with no shared belief about the truth will simply crumple under the assault of real conviction, ..." (Newbiggin 1989a: 9)

"We have to question the assumption that a secular state is neutral. It does not establish any of the world's religions, but it does establish a world-view which embodies truth-claims which Christians cannot accept and which must be brought into the open and challenged." (Newbiggin 1998: 152)

"Even in homes where the parents are committed Christians, it is hard, to the point of impossibility, for children to sustain belief in the meta-narrative of the Bible over against that understanding of the meta-narrative – the picture of the origins and development of nature, of human society as a whole – which is being offered to them at school. It is possible to maintain the telling of the biblical story in the privacy of home and church, but in so far as this story contradicts the meta-narrative of the schools, young people are placed in an impossible situation. ... A belief which is permitted only to exist in a bunker may survive for a time, but it must finally be obliterated." (*ibid*: 158-159)

"If the truth about the meaning and purpose of human life is something in principle unknowable, then there are no grounds for defending the liberal doctrine against any other doctrine of human nature and destiny. The helplessness of liberal societies in the face of militant religious fundamentalism amply illustrate the point. If the truth about these ultimate matters is unknowable, then there are no arguments except those of the gun and the bomb." (*ibid*: 142)

"When there is nothing between the individual and the state, the inevitable result is the coercion of minorities." (*ibid*: 156)

"... it does seem reasonable to hold that the development and persistence of democracy in western Europe has been made possible by the continuing persistence of a residual Christianity among its people, and that as this fades into the pure individualism of the consumer society the future of democracy will become increasingly problematical." (*ibid*: 145)

"What is unique about the Christian gospel is that those who are called to be its witnesses are committed to the public affirmation that it is true – true for all peoples at all times – and are at the same time forbidden to use coercion to enforce it. ... The toleration which a Christian is required to exercise is not something which he must exercise in spite of his or her belief that the gospel is true, but precisely because of this belief.

This marks one of the very important points of difference between Islam and Christianity." (*ibid*: 148-149)

"If we seek, as we ought to seek, a privileged position for the Christian faith in the public domain, this is not ... to exclude or prohibit beliefs but to provide the only foundation upon which freedom of belief is in the long run possible." (*ibid*: 163-164)

“If the gospel is to challenge the public life of our society, if Christians are to occupy the “high ground” which they vacated in the noon-time of “modernity”, it will not be by forming a Christian political party, or by aggressive propaganda campaigns. Once again it has to be said that there can be no going back to the “Constantinian” era. It will only be by movements that begin with the local congregation in which the reality of the new creation is present, known, and experienced, and from which men and women will go into every sector of public life to claim it for Christ, to unmask the illusions which have remained hidden and to expose all areas of public life to the illumination of the gospel. But that will only happen as and when local congregations renounce an introverted concern for their own life, and recognize that they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace for the whole life of society.” (Newbigin 1989b: 232-233. The chapter title (ch 18, pp 222-233) is “The Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel”)

We must interpret ISLAM as “I Sincerely Love All Muslims” (apparently coined by Brother Andrew (Andrew van de Bijl) in the late 1990s – Miller 2012: 152)

The gift of the gospel must come wrapped in us – our own obedient Christian life and that of an authentically Christian community.

Prayer

Pray for Christian Renewal

Pray that God will free us from the Western Religion, that we might be salt and light to both our own Western world and to the Islamic world.

“It is sadly true that power tends to corrupt, but without power it is impossible to do good. That is why there is a special obligation upon Christians to pray for those in authority. In the long run the power of those who govern can only be held in check if those who govern acknowledge realities greater than themselves. If it is a matter of accepted public doctrine that these realities are unknowable, it is hard to see by what criteria a particular government can be judged good or bad.” (Newbigin 1998: 145)

Pray for Muslim Renewal

However much the West tries to assuage Muslim grievances, radical Muslims will continue to wage war. In the end only Muslims can end the war. Islam itself must change from within.

Pray for Friendship Evangelism

Don’t give in to either hatred of Muslims or fear of them. Befriend the Muslims in your neighbourhood. You will find that talking religion with Muslims is easy and non-embarrassing. Encourage them to read the *Qur’an (Koran)* in a language they understand and to read the Bible for the fuller stories. Quietly encourage and support peace-promoting Muslims (*cf.* Luke 10:5-6, those genuinely seeking God and truth) and support low-key, unpublicised Christian mission.

So what will God do? Will God Use the Muslims?

Muslims hear God through dreams and visions. They respond to signs and wonders. They will form Jesus communities. Will they be a key to the re-evangelisation of the West?

“let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” (Hebrews 12: 2-3, NIV 2011)

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Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the help and encouragement of his colleague Mark Roques (www.markroques.com). For further materials by Mark and Arthur see www.realitybites.org.uk

Christian scholars who have read earlier drafts of this paper and provided very helpful feedback and advice have included Roy Clouser and Kerry Hollingsworth. Remaining shortcomings and failures to follow advice are of course the author's responsibility alone.

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