

Islam and Muslims in the World Today

- By Bassam Madany Prepared for a catechism class in 1976

It is difficult for us to comprehend the vast extent of Islam - a faith which spans two continents and has an estimated 600 million adherents.

Islam began early in the 7th century under the leadership of Mohammed who was an Arabian merchant. He felt, early in his life, a call from God to proclaim the message of God to the Arabs and to all mankind. From its earliest days, Islam has been a world religion. It has had a world view and it has challenged Christianity, not only on the doctrinal level but as an occupying force which took over so many of the countries of the world which used to be part of Christendom

For example - when the armies of this new religion burst out of Arabia, soon after the death of Mohammed in the early years of the 7th century, they came to Syria and from there branched into two divisions. They set out both to the east and the west. The western lands which were conquered by the Arabian armies were Christian lands. Countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, Libya, and all of North Africa were then part of the Christian world, but they all succumbed to the religion of Islam. In fact, at one time, Islam was well entrenched in Europe. The Arab armies, after conquering North Africa, crossed the strait of Gibraltar and occupied Spain. The Arab presence in Spain lasted until the discovery of America in the late 15th century. Many of the islands of the Mediterranean, such as Sicily, Sardinia, Cyprus and Crete, came under the power of the Arabs. At the time of the Reformation when Luther and Calvin were the leaders of the Protestant movement within the church, the Muslim armies of Turkey were threatening the Austrian empire. In fact Hungary, in Eastern Europe, was under the rule of the Muslims for many, many years.

Our interest today in the Muslim world may be due to the fact that suddenly the eastern part of the Arab world has become tremendously famous on account of the oil reserves which Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the sheikdoms of the Gulf possess. We may expect that in the coming years many people from America will get involved in working in that part of the Arab world, and thus will come in touch with Islam. So it is important for all of us to know more about this religion. Above all as Christians we have to realize that Islam is one of the most anti-Christian religions in the world. It is different from all the other non-Christian religions because it is the only one which claims to supercede or take the place of Christianity.

What are the beliefs of Islam? Here is a brief outline of Muslim doctrine.

The Muslim creed is very simple and short: There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is the Apostle of Allah. This creed teaches that God is the Creator of all things, that He is sovereign and transcendent, that he is the king of

the Day of Judgment. God is called the Compassionate and the Merciful, in the opening chapter of the Koran. He made all things, good and bad, by his decree. God, according to Islam, has 99 beautiful names such as the Merciful, the Compassionate, the All Knowing, the Almighty.

When we consider the Islamic doctrine of God we have to be careful lest we place Muslims, as many people do, in the same camp as the heathens. Heathens are the people who worship many gods. For example the religions of the Far East, such as Shintoism, Buddhism and Confucianism are heathen religions. The primitive religions of Africa are pagan religions. Islam is not a pagan or a heathen religion as some westerners think. Islam is a theistic religion which implies that it teaches that God is above His creatures and that He has created everything that exists and that He is not to be represented by any idols.

The greatest difference between the Christian and the Islamic doctrine of God is that Islam is a unitarian religion. God is solitary. He is the absolutely unique and the One. There is no place in the Muslim doctrine of God for the Three Persons of the Trinity. Muslims believe that we Christians believe in several gods. Unfortunately the Muslim misunderstanding of the doctrine of the Trinity is extremely painful for they think that we believe that God the Father, the Messiah and the Virgin Mary are the three persons of the Trinity. Therefore, right at the beginning of our faith, where it has to do with our Biblical doctrine of God, we part company with the Muslims.

Beyond that, the doctrine of God in Islam is very different from our doctrine in these two essential things. First of all Muslims teach that we can never get to know God. There is no such thing as "that I may know Him" in the Muslim religion. There is always a preposition which separates knowing and God. One knows about God. One knows of Him. One knows concerning Him. One may know the will of Allah, but never can a Muslim say - "I know God". There is no personal knowledge of God

The second important difference is that the God of Holy Scripture, the Triune God, is a God who has revealed Himself in His Holy Word as the One who is seeking the lost and who is not delighted in the death of the sinner but in his repentance. The Islamic doctrine of God has taken the doctrine of the sovereignty of God and made of it a doctrine of absolute fatalism so that there is no such thing as redemption or salvation. The only thing that man has to do is to respond to the revelation of God in the Koran. By his own powers man can live in harmony with the will of Allah. In other words, the Muslim doctrine of man is totally different from the Biblical doctrine of man. The Biblical doctrine of man shows us a being created in the image and likeness of God, who has fallen, who has rebelled against God and brought sin into the world. In Islam sin is a superficial matter a lack of knowledge of the will of Allah. Therefore Islam teaches that man, by doing the will of Allah, can be saved. There is no redemption in Islam.

What, then, are the practical teachings of Islam? The practical teachings of Islam are founded on the Koran, which is called the word of God, and on the example of Mohammed, the Apostle of God. In other words, they have two foundations for their ethics. The Koran, and the traditions. By traditions they mean the life and example of Mohammed. A Muslim is very much interested in the life of Mohammed, in all the stories that are related to Mohammed and in the sayings of Mohammed. He endeavors to pattern his life after the life of the prophet.

The Muslim is also required to believe in the existence of angels, jinns and devils. The jinns are creatures which may be good or bad. In their popular life Muslims are always talking about the jinns. Furthermore Muslims believe also in the day of judgment and in life after death. A Muslim is supposed to perform certain duties in his life in order that he may be accepted by God. The duties which the Muslim must perform are called the pillars of Islam. They are five:

1. The recitation of the word of witness, or the word of their creed. There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is the Apostle of Allah. In the Arabic language, which is the language of all Muslims when it comes to their devotional or liturgical life, the word of witness sounds like this: "La Ilaha illa'l-Allah; Muhammad rasool Allah."

2. The second pillar or duty for every Muslim is to pray at stated times during the day. This means that every devout Muslim must pray five times a day certain liturgical prayers, bowing his head in worship of Allah and facing the holy city of Mecca.

3. The third duty is observing the month of fasting, i.e., the month of Ramadan. During this month Muslims do not eat at all between sunrise and sunset; since the Muslim calendar is based on the moon the month of Ramadan may happen at any time during the year.

4. Giving the legal alms to the poor.

5. The pilgrimage to Mecca. Every able bodied Muslim must go to Mecca once in his life time to perform the duties of pilgrimage. When a person goes to Mecca he returns to his home land with the title El Hadji - which means the pilgrim. It is a title of honor. The pilgrimage to Mecca brings Muslims together from all over the world, numbering almost one million a year. This creates a tremendous feeling of solidarity or oneness among the Muslims of the world.