

THE THREAT OF CONTEMPORARY ISLAM

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A glance at the contemporary scene shows Islam and Christianity in a new kind of confrontation. Islam, revived after its recent "dark age," is on the march again while Christianity is showing signs of weakness brought on by the effects of too much secularism. Islam, numerically so strong, presents itself to the world as the final "revealed" religion, implying that all others are, therefore, outdated. The Muslim nations have become a new world power.

While we were in the so-called Dark Ages, the Islamic world was enjoying its Golden Age. And golden it was! The Muslims were very advanced in many fields, including medicine, architecture, literature, and astronomy. For example, Muslim doctors had made great advances as early as the eighth and ninth centuries. The most famous, Ibn Sina, was the author of an encyclopedic book known as al-Kanun, one of the world's first medical dictionaries. It was widely used and translated between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries.

In 1976 a "*Festival of Islam*" was held in Great Britain. At that time the British public was able to see on display all the rich works that can still be found in any Eastern bazaar: works of art in gold, silver, copper, and brass. The skill of the artisans, the design of the architects as seen in world-famous mosques, the handling of mosaics and colors, as well as the intelligence of the mathematicians and scholars will leave the average person awestruck and thoughtful. This must be a great religion to produce such fruit!

Describing the fabulous new London mosque--the largest outside the Arab world--a reporter commented on the impressive sight of over one thousand men bowing in prayer and two thousand shoes at the door! A wave of Muslim immigration has drastically changed the worshipping population of Britain. In contrast, Britain's Christian houses of worship are hundreds of years old and more than half empty. Her beautiful cathedrals are full of tourists who do not often stop to pray. Old buildings, nonexistent parking lots, and the search for pleasure on a weekend make churchgoing in Europe a rare and difficult pursuit. Is Christianity healthy enough to withstand a religious invasion?

While we are reluctantly admiring Islam and what it stands for, and while we are taking notice of its alarming successes in the Western world, there are some things we should keep in mind. Bernard Lewis, an authority on Middle East history, describes very clearly in his book, *The Arabs in History*, the interrelation between faith and politics that makes Islam the power it is today:

“Islam was not only a system of belief and cult. It was also a system of state, society, law, thought and art--a civilization with religion as its unifying, eventually dominating factor . . . Islam admitted no legislative power since law could emanate only from God through revelation. . . The divinely granted Shari'a [law] regulated every aspect of life, not only belief and cult, but also public law, constitutional and international, and private law, criminal and civil . . .”

You have only to read about the new *Islamic Republic of Iran*, or of the subsequent attempt in Pakistan to return to the Islamic law (Shari'a), to realize the far-reaching extent of this world view. Islam permeates every corner of life. As Bernard Lewis also remarks:

“Such pairs of words as Church and State, spiritual and temporal, ecclesiastical and lay, had no real equivalents in Arabic until modern times, when they were created to translate modern ideas; for the dichotomy which they express was unknown to medieval Muslim society.”

Other facets of Islam will not be so obvious to the inexperienced observer. One of them is that Islam regards all other faiths as illegitimate or outmoded. Christians going to Islamic countries have never had the freedom to put up churches on the scale that Muslims presently enjoy in erecting mosques in the Western world. There has been no reciprocity. Likewise, though we may read of numerous Westerners converting to Islam, it is expedient that we be silent or cautious about reporting the Muslims who are converting to Christianity. There is always the reality of persecution. The large Eastern Christian Arab population that has survived these fourteen hundred years has done so under a variety of subtle and unpleasant persecutions.

Another item that will not receive top billing but is coming to the notice of the world is Islam's appalling treatment of its women. Muslim propaganda will tell of the marvelous rights of women, but the truth is that Islam teaches the religious significance of male dominance. The result has been the repression of the Muslim female population with only a few exceptions. And considering the fact that Islam has 700 million adherents, this adds up to a very large number of women and children. Perhaps there is no greater cause for thankfulness and praise to God than the emancipation of women that has come through the spread of Christianity.

Another thing we must always keep in mind is the deep spiritual need of the vast Muslim population. Granted, they have beautiful mosques and thousands of Imams (preachers), but what kind of spiritual food do they get if politics is the major theme? We must remember that they are real people like ourselves, with personal problems and deep concerns. They are perplexed and worried about their future and tired of hatred and wars. They are tired of the weekly diet of political sermons on the holy day of Friday.

Because the state and religion are two sides of the same coin, the mosque has become the mouthpiece of whoever is in power. If we understood Arabic, we would be shocked at the contents of many of these sermons. Israel, secularism, the West, and nationalism:

each takes a beating. Remember the crowds who streamed from the mosques to the embassy in Teheran? Have you ever seen people rising from prayer and rushing from church with their fists clenched?

As people made in the image of God, Muslims are hungry for a word from God. They are starving for a morsel of truth. When they hear the Bible preached, proclaimed, and expounded, they often respond. We recognize this as the saving work of the Holy Spirit. At this very minute, in the remotest parts of the Muslim world, the Holy Spirit is at work. Because of the very nature of Islam we may not print statistics of conversions, and many who come to Christ will remain secret believers. But pray that one day these brothers and sisters in the faith may be free to declare their stand. Today the Word of God is accomplishing its saving purpose among Muslims, and this remains our strongest hope.

Two Muslims speak for themselves:

“People are thirsty for something besides politics and news of wars. They need to turn to the way of piety and righteousness. They need to be reminded of the importance of faith and commitment to the proper religious principles. Christianity is giving me something I never had before--continued peace in my soul.”

“Our Islamic doctrine lacks depth in the spiritual realm. Thus, it does not satisfy our spiritual needs. I am finding in Christianity the nourishing spiritual food I so desperately need.”

As members of the church of Jesus Christ, we must have only one attitude toward Muslims. We must desire fervently to evangelize them in spite of all the roadblocks.

As Christian citizens of free democratic societies, we must assume a just attitude toward them and toward all people. In a world with a population in the billions, we must respect each other as political entities.

Muslims need to accept the fact that when they demand of Britain and of North America the freedom to express their faith and its worldview within our borders, they ought to reciprocate and allow Christians to exist freely within theirs. Love for Muslims, and justice in our relations with them, must be our guiding principles.