

## **The Authentic Voice**

by Vivienne Stacey

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“Are the Pharisees the Muslims?” asked the postmaster who had just read two gospels avidly. The Pakistan Bible Society circulation had certainly increased and somehow this Muslim questioner had obtained copies of Matthew and John perhaps through the Bible Society shop in Lahore, perhaps through a bookroom in Gujranwalla, perhaps through enrolling in the Pakistan Bible Correspondence School. He was spiritually hungry having many questions in his search for truth. Of course the answer to his question was “NO”. The Pharisees were not the Muslims as the Muslim faith did not start till 622 AD with the Hijra – the flight of the prophet Mohammad from Mecca to Medina. However the question provokes us to thought. The Pharisees have been unfairly blackened perhaps – they were mainly men of integrity, extremely religious, mistaking the forms of religion for the reality, emphasizing fasting, tithing but forgetting the spirit of the law. The Muslim has much in common with the Pharisee with his emphasis on correct theology and on the five pillars of Islam i.e.:

1. **The recitation of the creed:** There is no god but God and Mohammad is the apostle of God.
2. **Praying:** The saying of specified prayers at five set times in the day with the prescribed ablutions beforehand, the correct prayer portions and direction (towards Mecca).
3. **Fasting:** During the holy month of Ramadan – the month in which the holy book, the Quran came down from heaven and was given to the prophet Mohammad by the angel Gabriel. Muslims fast from dawn to sunset that is, from when a white thread is distinguishable from a black one, until dark. They eat at night. The last month of fasting ended on 6 October 1975 and moves up ten days each year as the Muslim calendar is lunar.
4. **Alms Giving:** A Muslim is required to give 2 1/2% of his income for religious purposes and to the poor.
5. **Pilgrimage:** Every Muslim who can afford it is required to make the pilgrimage once in his lifetime to Mecca, the religious centre of Islam in Saudi Arabia. (In religious importance Medina is the second city and Jerusalem the third). In 1974 the total number of pilgrims to Mecca was 607,755 from many countries including Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, India, Bangladesh, Lebanon and UK. (Europe Yearbook- Asia and Africa 1974).

It is important that we listen to the authentic voice of the Muslim gaining our insights from what practicing and also more nominal Muslims are saying and doing today. Recently a friend and I went to a lecture on the significance of the fast of Ramadan given by a Somali student working in this country on a PhD thesis on Islamic poetry. After the lecture an African questioner asked if there was any concession in the rules in fasting for the modern worker in heavy industry. Many Turkish Muslims work in German factories engaged in occupations which make heavy physical demands. The answer was that for this there is no modification of the rules. However our Muslim lecturer outlined some of the difficulties faced by the practicing Muslim in an alien country where Muslims are a small minority. The Islamic religion demands much of the believer and involved him through the day. Prayer is at five set times during the day. Before each prayer time, purification (ceremonial washing of the hands, forehead etc., is obligatory) but with no facilities for washing next to a place set aside for prayer, the Muslim is in difficulties. If a keen Muslim misses the noon prayer because of his college timetable, then he does two sets of prayer at the next prayer time or all the five together.

Our speaker had two other very interesting observations. Firstly that all Christians in the UK are not religiously orientated and for these the devout Muslims pray. Secondly that the British people are tolerant even if they do not understand- this he considered not a compliment but a judgment. Tolerance is not necessarily a virtue- it soon can become permissiveness.

1976 will bring to the UK many learned Muslim scholars, Islamic exhibitions etc., for the World of Islam Festival- and here I quote from the brochure giving the preliminary programme- London April to June 1976:

“Islamic civilization spreading east to Indonesia, west to Morocco, north to Tashkent and south to Nigeria, has brought a sense of cultural unity to many diverse races. For over 1300 years it has given to the world a culture of great artistic and intellectual achievement, with the Quran as its inspirational source and Mecca as its religious centre. In cities like Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Fez, Cordova, Isfahan, Istanbul and Delhi, universities fostered scientific and artistic development to which the West is permanently indebted. The fruits of Islamic architecture, engineering, medicine, calligraphy, music, philosophy and poetry have enriched the world's cultural heritage. The World of Islam Festival will reflect the splendour of this civilization and encourage a new, informed understanding of Islam for both laymen and scholars. The sponsor, that is the World of Islam Festival Trust and its organization are entirely non-political. Their concern is the presentation of the scholarly cultural artistic achievement inspired by Islam. The realization of the Festival is based on the support of

Islamic countries. The scope of the festival is immense .It is an attempt to put the whole culture of Islam into perspective. Major institutions and cultural organizations, including the Arts Council and the British Museum have joined together with the World of Islam Festival Trust to achieve this. In addition to the exhibition's programme, the Festival will incorporate music, performing acts, books and synopsis. The South Bank Auditorium will hold performances of classical music and the Albert Hall a three day festival of folk music and dancing. The BBC and television networks throughout the world intend to show six films made by the Trust. A series of books on Islamic subjects will be published and a programme set up for academic institutions and scholars”.

Here is an opportunity to hear the authentic voice of Muslims today- to learn and to seek to understand- an opportunity perhaps to see the uniqueness of Jesus Christ against a different canvas, to understand why the focus of Christian art is the Word Incarnate. Even Jesus while the focus of Muslim art is found in calligraphy in present the holy book, Islam's greatest miracle. The Pharisee and the Muslim may not be so different. Jew and Muslim alike are stumbled by the Suffering Servant of God and have not yet comprehended the glory of His person and His work. Let us not be so tolerant that we fail to hold the deposit of the Truth entrusted to us. (2 Timothy 2:12-14).Let us not be so intolerant that we fail to tune in to the authentic voices of our moment in history.

We are the communicators of God's supreme communication-“The Word made flesh” and all wave lengths and all news media can be helpful to the Christian as he seeks to glorify God. There are calls to Christian prayers. One remembers the concluding paragraph of Dr. Kenneth Craig's thought-provoking book –“The Call of the Minaret” – page 356:

“Two of the most sacred mosques of the Islamic world look down from their sanctuaries eastwards towards the trees of old Gethsemane. From its olive covered slopes the Garden of Agony looks westward to the domes and minarets of the ancient skyline. In the still dawn the muezzin can be heard calling to prayer across the valley where Jesus communed with His spirit until midnight and went forth – the Christ of the Cross, the Saviour of the World. Through all their history since the minarets were raised, the two faiths have been that near, that far. It is out of the meaning of the Garden that Christ's men have crossed into the world of the domes of the muezzin. We, who in our generation listen to the call of the minaret, may hear it compellingly from the muezzin over Gethsemane. There we shall best understand wherewith we must answer – and how- and why”.