

The *SBJT* Forum: Key Issues for Understanding Islam and Muslims

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, George W. Braswell, Jr., Joost Pikkert, and Samuel Shahid have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: What are some of the most important things you think that Christians should know about Islam and about Muslims?

D. A. Carson: Owing not least to 9/11, countless thousands of Christians have taken it upon themselves to become better informed about Islam. Books and essays pour from the presses, some of them quite outstanding, others quite frankly poor or misinformed.

I am a little hesitant to provide a list of "the most important things" Christians should know, partly because that sort of list should look different according to the shape of Islam in various parts of the world (for example, the shape of Islam in a totalitarian kingdom like Saudi Arabia is rather different from the shape of Islam in a more-or-less democratic but heavily Muslim country like Turkey), partly because the contents of the list should vary according to what Christians already know about Islam, and partly because the list should vary according to the nature and frequency of the contact we enjoy with Muslims. What a Christian living in Lincoln, Nebraska, needs to know about Muslims may not be exactly the same thing as what should be known by Christians living in New York City or

Islamabad.

Still, one must start somewhere.

(1) In its own way, Islam is as varied as is the world of Christendom. Just as a fundamentalist in southern Indiana would not want to be tainted with the views of, say, a liberal Catholic in Holland, and might protest that the views of the liberal Catholic do not represent true Christianity, so Muslims may vociferously disavow and condemn the views of many other Muslims. The common allegiance to Islam did not prevent Iraq from attacking Iran or trying to take over Kuwait.

(2) Many of us have become mildly informed about the Sunnis and the Sufis, and perhaps about the Wahhabism of the Saudis. But there is another kind of distinction that is at least as important—the distinction between the well-informed Muslim (of whatever group) and what for lack of a better expression we might call the street Muslim. Many street Muslims around the world think that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity stipulates that God copulated with Mary to produce Jesus: the Trinity is God, Mary, and Jesus. They find the notion bizarre, and I agree. It is also not what Christians believe. A well-informed Muslim would not labor under such a delusion, of course. But just as there

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are many “Christians” who are wrong about pretty elementary components of the Christian faith, let alone about the religions of others, so there are countless Muslims who are socially and culturally committed to Islam, without having much theological grasp of its teachings, and still less of the teachings of Christianity. Just as there are conservative Christians who may know a fair bit about their own heritage but almost nothing about anyone else’s, so there are devout Muslims who are adequately informed about their own faith, but whose knowledge of the religious beliefs of others is vanishingly small. And just as some Christians do not know the Bible, so some Muslims do not know the Qur’an. Muslims deny, of course, that Jesus rose from the dead. Many street Muslims also insist that Jesus did not die on the cross, but that he was rescued by his disciples and lived for many years in relative seclusion. Certainly that is affirmed in the Qur’an—once. But the Qur’an in three other places seems to affirm that Jesus *did* die on the cross. Well-informed Muslims will know more of this debate. My point is that we must distinguish between the knowledge of Islam exemplified by street Muslims and the knowledge of Islam displayed by well-read believers, let alone by Muslim scholars.

(3) More so than Christians, Muslims tend to rely pretty heavily on the weight of history to buttress their self-identity and theological reasoning, but under close inspection it is a highly selective history. Most Muslims can tell you about the injustice of the Crusades. They are eager to remind you of the time when the Arab world was academically way ahead of Europe, and list the injustices intrinsic to the colonization of some Muslim powers

(e.g. Egypt) or to the destruction of the Ottoman Empire. On the other hand, Muslim collective historical memory tends to ignore other historical data, and it is becoming important for Christians to bone up on some of this history. For her first three centuries, the church expanded throughout the Roman Empire and beyond by means of witness, suffering, martyrdom, and courage; by contrast, the first three centuries of Islam was characterized by a triumphant rise to power by means of armed violence and brutal suppression. Three of the four “Rightly Guided Caliphs” who succeeded Muhammad were assassinated, the last by his own followers. Yes, the West was guilty of horrible slaughter during the Crusades. But of course, the “holy lands” that the West wanted to recover were taken by Muslims under force of arms, and the Christians were trying to take them back. What Muslim feels that the initial Muslim conquest of Palestine is something of which to repent? During the Crusades the savage slaughter was evenly matched by both sides. But by and large, Christians look back on the Crusades as a mistake, a tragic lapse, even if (initially) well motivated; it is impossible to find similar Muslim regret or repentance. (And it is worth observing that the Spaniards did succeed in taking back their own country from the Moors.) As far as Christian and Muslim response is concerned, the history of slavery is somewhat analogous. Approximately eleven million Africans were shipped as slaves to America; about thirteen million were shipped up the Persian Gulf into Arabia. Two centuries and more later, an enormous literature has arisen in the West that probes our guilt, submerges itself in introspection, and regrets the inconsistency between our religious claims and

our conduct. But I know of no similar body of guilt literature in the Muslim world. Indeed, slave trading was first suppressed in the Arab world by British gunboats, but continued in many circles well into the twentieth century. Muslims want you to believe that whenever they have been in power, they have been broadly tolerant toward Christians and Jews. The element of truth in this claim is that various totalitarian Muslim regimes were sometimes more tolerant than their official policy dictated. Nevertheless the standard policy across the centuries, and usually put into practice, is that Christians and Jews were free to practice their respective religions, so long as (a) they never said anything that could be judged to denigrate Islam or the Prophet; and (b) they did not proselytize any Muslims. Meanwhile, they faced a constant barrage of taxation and other regulations that reminded them of their second-class status. And if a non-Muslim converted to Islam, to leave Islam at that point was apostasy, and warranted the death penalty. When Islam pushed its way into Eastern and Central Europe, it devised a military system known as the *Devshirme*, which involved the abduction by force of young Christian boys in Europe, forcing them to Islamize, and constituting them into an elite army corps. Not many people seem to be listening, but Muslims trying to impose *Shariah* in Nigeria have killed about six thousand Christians during the last few years, and almost ten thousand more in Indonesia. And what shall we say of the two million slaughtered in southern Sudan, where Islam mixes with tribalism and oil revenues to make a ghoul-ish brew? No less frightening is the state of education in almost all of the Muslim world (see especially Hanada Taha-

Thomure, *Academic Freedom in Arab Universities* [Lanham: University Press of America, 2003]). The entire Arab world translates about 330 foreign books into Arabic per year; the total number translated since the ninth century being about 100,000—about the same number that Spain translates into Spanish *each year*.

(4) It is extraordinarily important to recognize that Western Christians in particular, and Muslims worldwide, deploy astonishingly different categories. There are no “clergy” in Islam, as the term is understood in most Christian denominations. The *uelema* are professional men of religion, in the sense that they are certified and given the task of upholding and interpreting the Holy Law, but there is no priesthood, and there are no sacraments or ordinances or rituals that only the *uelema* may perform. Above all, there is no distinction between “church” and “state.” That distinction, axiomatic in the West, goes back to Jesus himself (“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s . . .”). Often in the West the distinction has been observed in the breach, but the tension between church and state has never disappeared in Christian thought, and ultimately became one of the planks that made representative democracy possible. As a result, informed Christians struggle with the tension between the “already” (Christ rules *already*) and the “not yet” (we live with many kinds of hopes still unfulfilled, because Christ’s rule is still contested, and we have *not yet* reached the new heaven and the new earth). We live with tensions when church and state make mutually conflicting claims, and when in the worst cases we must choose disjunctively, we side with God, and take whatever punishment the state doles out. But in Muslim thought, there is no notion of

“church” set over against state. All must bow to the will of Allah. The *ummah*, the people of Allah, run across all national state lines, so that statehood and nationhood are not nearly as important in Islamic thinking as the *ummah*, the people of Allah. (The irony, of course, is that nevertheless some Muslim states have taken up arms against other Muslim states!) For most well-informed Muslims today, the Christian distinction between church and state is part of the problem: it gives rise to the endless demands to secularize, which is in fact the de-godding of God, the genesis of all idolatry and immorality. Thoughtful Muslims are today less afraid of the West because it is (or was) ostensibly Christian, than because it is so deeply immoral and secularized. And they do have a point! Yet the solutions that thoughtful Christians will advance to the moral and spiritual decline of the West are not the same as those advanced by most thoughtful Muslims. Indeed, this refusal to allow a distinction between “church” and “state,” and this fear of philosophical modernization (let alone postmodernization), have inspired some of the conservative reformers in Islam, such as Sayyid Qutb (1906-66; he was executed in Egypt on charges of treason, specifically for planning the assassination of President Nasser), who have insisted that the route to the blessing of God is to return to an ever deeper and more consistent devotion to Islam, and to refuse to be contaminated by these Western perversions. It is no accident that of the thirty-eight or so Muslim or predominantly Muslim nations, only one is fairly thoroughly democratic in governance (viz. Turkey), and that nation is of course by far the most secularized (the heritage of Kemal Ataturk)—and there is

substantial pressure there to reduce these secularizing trends. Malaysia comes close, but although the Chinese population in Malaysia enjoys fair religious freedoms, the Malay population is deeply Muslim, and Malays who convert openly are in considerable danger. (On these and many other points, one might profitably read two books by Bernard Lewis, viz. *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2002]; and *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* [New York: Modern Library, 2003].)

(5) The last two points bring us to another reality that Christians must recognize. Around the world, Muslims simultaneously feel both superior and victimized. They are convinced that they have the final revelation, and their theology tells them that they should be advancing, and becoming number one in the world. On the other hand, their progressive military defeats across the last three and a half centuries, and their geopolitical insignificance until the rise of big oil gave them big bucks, have conspired to make them feel victimized by the West. Anything that is wrong in their world is easily blamed on the West. This is all the easier to accomplish, of course, because most media outlets in the Muslim world are strenuously controlled. The combination of a sense of moral superiority and profound victimization is lethal.

(6) When Muhammed first had his visions and tried to persuade the citizens of Mecca, he was opposed and persecuted. That phase of his pilgrimage produced many utterances on the importance of religious tolerance. Eventually he was driven out and went to Medina, where in due course he became both the religious and political leader. By force of arms, he

gained total power in Medina, and eventually imposed his will on Mecca the same way. That phase of his pilgrimage generated another set of utterances, having to do with the extermination of opponents after they have been given the opportunity to convert and refused. That is why the Qur'an includes both kinds of utterances. But some Muslims think that the Prophet's move from Mecca to Medina is properly paradigmatic: when they are in the minority, they ought to appeal to tolerance; when they are strong enough to take control, they ought to crush opposition, for this too honors Allah, under the fresh circumstances. Policy makers in the Western world are simply naive if they do not recognize these common theological commitments.

(7) Throughout the world, countless Muslims are being converted to Christ. Some of them are secret Christians. Many become Christians in the Muslim "diaspora": I have personally met hundreds of Iranians living in many cities around the world who have become Christians, often in the context of remarkable dreams of Jesus Christ. (Incidentally, a friend in Indonesia, greatly experienced in Muslim evangelism, has told me how effective he finds it to expound Matthew 1-2, precisely because there are five dreams plus the testimony of angels. What the secularized West finds vaguely embarrassing, dreams and visions and angels, may in God's providence be the singular means of grace and conversion in some other part of the world.) Reliable reports say that there are more Christians today in Iran than at any time in the last one thousand years. The most populous Muslim country, Indonesia, is also probably the country with the most fruitful evangelism of Muslims (at least on some of its

islands). It is even possible that the unending drum of violence prosecuted by Islamic fundamentalists may, in the fullness of time, so alienate fellow Muslims that this will turn out to be preparation for the gospel.

(8) We cannot effectively bear witness to Christ among the Muslims we know in our communities unless we love them—and that means befriending them, getting to know them, treating them with courtesy and respect, learning their culture and customs, inviting them to meals, and enjoying hospitality in their homes, too. We must get to know them; they must get to know us. And if you have not read anything at all along the lines of encouraging outreach to Muslim neighbors, then of the increasingly voluminous literature I think I would recommend, as a matter of first choice, the book by Tony Payne, *Islam in Our Backyard: A Novel Argument* (Kingsford: Matthias, 2002), as the place to start.

(9) We need to understand how different the structure of salvation is in Islam compared with the structure of salvation in Christianity. Muslims and Christians differ not only on central matters such as Christology and the resurrection of Jesus, but on equally fundamental matters of grace and merit. Especially on the street, it is common to be told by devout Muslims that keeping the Ramadan fast perfectly and absolutely is the most important duty, or one of the most important duties, before God. By contrast, controlling the heart is a relatively small thing, like good manners. A Thai Muslim recently averred to a friend of mine that reading the Qur'an in Arabic, which she can read but not understand, earns much extra credit, especially during the feast of Ramadan. By contrast, reading the Qur'an in a Thai translation

would be a waste of time: there would be no extra merit. Contrast this with the importance of intelligibility in Paul's estimate of things (1 Corinthians 14). If by hearing the Word we have faith, if by knowing the truth we are set free, if by grace through faith we are saved, then from a biblical perspective Islam is a profoundly alien religion. Understand this, and weep, and evangelize.