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WHAT IS ISLAM?

To hold back from the fullest meeting with Muslims would be to refrain from the fullest discipleship to Christ. . . . Not to care about Islam would be not to care about Christ.

KENNETH CRAGG

How would you characterize someone who believes in the literal, verbal inspiration of Scripture, who holds that Jesus is God's virgin-born Messiah, that Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, bodily ascended into heaven, and will one day return to do battle with the antichrist and in the end truly reign on earth? This person knows that Satan is alive and well on planet Earth, that angels and demons are real forces to be reckoned with, and that after death everyone on earth will go to one of two places—the burning fires of hell or the beautiful palaces of heaven. This individual does not believe in evolution, but believes that God created the world in six literal days. This person happens to be a teetotaler, is strongly pro-life, and is committed to traditional family values. Women are highly regarded in the religious community to which this person belongs, but they do not function as preachers and leaders there. This person is also deeply patriotic, regards pacifism as a weakness, deplores the separation of church and

state, and believes that government (ideally) should enforce God's will in every area of society.

Do you recognize this person as a strict, conservative, Bible-believing Christian? Well, maybe. But he or she might just as well be a devout, conscientious Muslim! More than any two religious traditions on earth, Christianity and Islam share both striking similarities and radical differences. Historically, the relationship between Christians and Muslims has been strained at best. All too frequently it has been marked by bloodshed and violence. But there is a verse in the Quran that presents a helpful perspective. This verse tells Muslims, "You will surely find that the nearest in affection to those who believe are the ones who say, 'We are Christians'" (5:82). On this good note, we begin our brief overview of the world's second largest and fastest growing religious tradition.

Who Are Muslims?

Muslims are sometimes called Muhammadans, after the prophet Muhammad. He organized the first Muslim community, or *ummah*, in seventh-century Arabia, and through him the Quran was given to the world. But Muslims themselves take the word *Muhammadan* as an insult. For all their devotion to Muhammad, they regard him neither as divine nor as the founder of their religion. Muhammad did not claim to be sinless or perfect, and, unlike Jesus, he did not receive worship from other human beings.

Another word still found in most dictionaries is *Moslem*, the anglicized form of the Arabic *Muslim*. *Moslem* is also heard as a term of condescension that harks back to colonial times, a word coined by stodgy Westerners with stiff upper lips who found it difficult to make the *mu* sound!

More than one billion Muslims in the world are followers of Islam. The word *islam* literally means "submission" or "surrender." It comes from the Arabic root word *s-l-m*, which connotes peace in Semitic languages—as in the Hebrew greeting *shalom* or in the name of the holy city, *Jeru-salem*. We hear echoes of this same root word in the common everyday greetings of Muslims—

salamalek (“peace be with you”) and *bissalma* (“go in peace”). Muslims believe that the very word *islam*, as well as the way of life to which it points, was revealed by God himself in the Quran. Some eighty days before he died in A.D. 632, Muhammad received a final word of revelation. After warning Muslims not to eat pork or any animals that hadn’t been slaughtered in a ritually pure manner (a kosherlike procedure called *halal*), God said to them, “This day I have perfected your religion for you and completed my favor to you. I have chosen Islam to be your faith” (5:3).

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Islam, in its original meaning, then, refers to a life of total surrender and obedience to God—exactly the kind of complete commitment called for in the love-hymn Christians sing about Jesus:

All to Jesus I surrender,
All to Him I freely give. . . .
All to Jesus I surrender,
Lord, I give myself to Thee. . . .

Although Muhammad rediscovered this “straight path to God” (another description of Islam), Muslims believe that this kind of submissiveness has always been the true natural religion of human beings everywhere. This is an important point in understanding the contrasting views of salvation in Islam and Christianity—a theme to be discussed in chapter 6.

If Islam means surrender to the will of God, then a *Muslim* is one who has made this commitment. Who are Muslims? Where do they live? What languages do they speak? What religious duties are required of them?

Many people mistakenly think that most, if not all, Muslims are Arabs. Perhaps this is because so much attention is focused in the news media on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Middle East and the fact that Muhammad himself was from Arabia.

Many are surprised to learn of the truly global reach of Islam. For example, some 200 million Muslims live in Indonesia alone—about the same number as live in all the Arab countries combined. There are more Muslims in China alone than there are Southern Baptists in the whole world. When we speak of Islam at the dawn of the twenty-first century, we refer to a world-encompassing faith that has a growing presence in every continent.

The “Abode of Islam” (as Muslims refer to the Islamic world) stretches from Morocco in the western part of North Africa to Indonesia and the Philippines in the Far East. It extends from Nigeria and Tanzania in sub-Saharan Africa to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in Central Asia. Within this vast sea of humanity, mis-siologists have identified five major blocs of people bound together by common cultural and language networks:¹

- *Arabic*—This includes Saudi Arabia, with its Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina, as well as Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and the Palestinians in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank. It also includes the Arabic peoples of Egypt and other North African countries.
- *Indo-Persian*—A complex assortment of peoples that includes the Kurds, many Afghans, the Tajiks of central Asia, and Urdu speakers in India and Pakistan, among others.
- *Turkish*—The Turks belong to the same language family as the Koreans. They include many people groups that live beyond the borders of modern-day Turkey. Among these are the Turkmen, Azeris, Uzbeks, Kirghiz, Kazakhs, and Uighurs.
- *Malay*—This bloc of peoples includes Muslims in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, and other islands of the South Pacific.
- *African*—This group includes all the black peoples who live in African countries south of the Sahara Desert.

Within these five great families of Muslim peoples dwell many of the world’s refugees. From Kosovo to Kabul, from Gaza to Bangladesh, millions of Muslims have been displaced by war, poverty, and plague. Although Muslim countries control two-

thirds of the world's oil reserves, the bounty from this natural resource has not alleviated dire human needs in so much of the Islamic world. One indication of social ferment in this vast world is *urbanization*. In recent years huge Muslim metropolises have arisen as millions of peasants seeking to survive have crowded into Istanbul, Cairo, Algiers, Karachi, Khartoum, Teheran, Jakarta, and Islamabad. These great cities have also proven to be fertile soil for Muslim militants with their anti-Western and anti-Christian rhetoric. What is called Islamic fundamentalism is only one stream of a much larger phenomenon, namely, the recovery and reassertion of Islamic identity based on a return to the founding principles of the Muslim faith. This means applying *Sharia*, the law of God based on the Quran, to every aspect of life—to its social and political, as well as religious, dimensions.

One of the most striking religious trends during the latter third of the twentieth century was the movement of Muslims in large numbers to the West. Islam is now the second largest religion in Europe. It will soon surpass Judaism to claim that distinction in North America as well. There are more Muslims than Methodists in England—the home of John Wesley—and more Muslims than Episcopalians and Presbyterians combined in the United States. United Nations world populations studies project that by 2025 some 30 percent of earth's inhabitants will be Muslims—nearly one out of every three persons in the world.²

Today there are approximately seven million Muslims and more than 13,000 mosques in North America. Muslims were among the first slaves brought to this continent from Africa. In 1717, a group of “Arabic-speaking slaves who ate no pork and believed in Allah and Muhammad” arrived in the American colonies.³ From these early beginnings, Islam has become a major force within the African-American community in North America. Elijah Muhammad served as the key figure in this development. Born Elijah Poole, he was the son of a Baptist preacher in Georgia who moved to Detroit in 1923. There he met W. D. Fard, the founder of a black separatist movement known as the “Lost-Found Nation of Islam in the Wilderness of North America.” In

1935 Elijah Muhammad became the leader of this group, which has continued to grow despite its internal divisions and certain unorthodox teachings (such as Elijah's deification of Fard as Allah!).

Malcolm X remains the most prominent national leader to emerge from this movement. A brilliant thinker and fiery orator, he made a pilgrimage to Mecca shortly before his assassination in 1965. The *Autobiography of Malcolm X* has become an American literature classic and an introduction to Islam for many new converts. In recent years, Wallace Dean Muhammad, Elijah's son, has sought to more closely align this movement with international orthodox Islam. This approach was rejected by Louis Farrakhan, who has emerged as the most charismatic and controversial leader in the revived Nation of Islam. On October 6, 1995, he led the famous "Million Man March" in Washington, D.C. In addition to many Muslims, this event also attracted Christian participants who sympathized with Farrakhan's moral rigor and his call to discipline if not with his distinctive doctrinal beliefs.

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For all the success of these Black Muslim movements, however, the majority of Muslims in America are immigrants and their descendants.

Beginning in 1875, they have come to these shores from all quarters of the Islamic world. They represent numerous ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, as well as diverse political traditions. Physicians, businessmen, automobile workers, university students, restaurateurs, technicians, and entrepreneurs, they are found in nearly every walk of life. Their cultural impact on American communities is noticeable. For instance, a newspaper reporter in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, observed that "during the last twenty years . . . the number of Muslim families in the region has quadrupled, and the number of mosques in the city alone has quintupled to 30. Ten years ago, there were perhaps only one or

two *halal* meat markets, which obey Islamic dietary rules; now there are at least 10. There was perhaps only one *halal* restaurant; now there are at least half a dozen.”⁴

What this reporter observed ten years ago has become a major trend in all large cities, and even in some small towns, across the United States and Canada. The Muslim presence is felt in other ways as well. In June 1991, Siraj Wahaj, a black convert to Islam, became the first Muslim to deliver the daily prayer in the U.S. House of Representatives. Eight months later (February 1992) Wallace Dean Muhammad led the opening prayers in the United States Senate. Muslim chaplains now offer regular religious services for followers of Islam who serve in the United States armed forces. On September 15, 2001, when Dr. Billy Graham addressed a grieving nation from the National Cathedral in Washington, assisting him in this service of prayer and remembrance were Muslim imams, as well as Jewish rabbis, Christian ministers, and priests.

Muslim communities in North America are growing through conversion as well as immigration. The Muslim Student Association, which was organized in 1963, publishes a monthly journal titled *Islamic Horizons*. This journal aims to correct misconceptions about Islam and to convey the message of the Prophet Muhammad to non-Muslim students and faculty members. In a similar vein, the American Muslim Council, begun in 1990, works to give Muslims a voice on issues of ethics and public policy. Among other things, this group wants to counter the notion that American principles of morality and justice are based on the Judeo-Christian tradition alone. They favor the more inclusive idea of such values deriving from the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition.

For the foreseeable future, Muslims will certainly continue to become more a part of mainstream daily life in North America and Europe. This means that opportunities for both interfaith dialogue and Christian witness will increase. Rather than react with suspicion, fear, or apathy, Christians need to be well-informed about the Islamic religion and also to understand the distinctive teachings of their own Christian faith. Without this, how can we

reach out with Christlike love and godly wisdom to our Muslim neighbors and friends? As a British evangelical leader said recently, “God was so concerned that Muslims hear the gospel that he has brought the mission fields to the churches.”⁵

Five Pillars

Regardless of where Muslims come from or what language they speak, they hold certain beliefs in common, and certain distinctive practices set them apart from other religious groups. True enough, not all Muslims are consistent in their beliefs or devout in the practices of their faith. There are many nominal Muslims—just as there are many nominal Christians. In addition, throughout the Muslim world there is the phenomenon of *folk Islam*, a term that describes the worldview of many ordinary Muslims who accept magical beliefs and practices at variance with the formal facets of official Islam. In his fascinating book *The Unseen Face of Islam*, Bill Musk describes the world of popular Islam, with its veneration of saints, divinization rituals, and power encounters.⁶ Still, however widely their practices may vary, there are certain basic tenets and religious duties all Muslims acknowledge as given by God. At the heart of the Muslim faith are the “Five Pillars” of Islam.

Shahada

This simple one-sentence confession of faith is the basis for everything Muslims teach and believe: “I bear witness and testify that there is no god but God [Allah] and Muhammad is the Messenger of God.” The word for “messenger” in Arabic is *rasul*. It is sometimes translated “envoy,” “prophet,” or “apostle.” *Rasul* refers to a special kind of prophet who has been divinely sent to promulgate the holy Law of God—the *Sharia*. Others before Muhammad had fulfilled this office—Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus. Muhammad was not the first of God’s special messengers, but he is the last—the “seal of the prophets.” In the final sermon he preached before he died, Muhammad declared that no

prophet or apostle would come after him and that no new faith would be born after Islam. So basic is the *Shahada* to Muslim identity that it is literally sewn (in Arabic) on the national flag of Saudi Arabia. This simple far-reaching creed is also the gateway into Islam, which has no sacraments or priesthood and no right of initiation, such as baptism. To solemnly recite this confession of faith, with sincerity, in the presence of at least two witnesses in its Arabic original (*la ilaha illa Allah*), is to become a Muslim.

This statement not only affirms the prophethood of Muhammad and the oneness of God, in reverse order, but it also makes an important negative statement that is central to all Muslim theology. There is “no god” but God. In affirming the one unique supreme and sovereign Creator-God, the *Shahada* rules out all other claimants to the status of divinity. It powerfully repudiates all pseudo-gods and would-be gods. The principle of divine unity (*tawhid*) excludes all idolatry. The worst sin imaginable, from the Muslim perspective, is to identify or associate something created with the Creator. This sin of “associating with God” is called *shirk* in Arabic. Those who commit it are known as *mushrikun*. To be a *mushrik* is to attribute to something other than God the power, right, worship, knowledge, sovereignty, and majesty that properly belong to him alone.

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The reciting of the *Shahada* serves as an expression of this submission to God. This is at the heart of true Islamic faith. The *Shahada* is whispered into the ears of a newborn child at birth. It is repeated throughout life in the daily round of required prayers. And it is said again over the body of a Muslim about to be buried. The *Shahada* is also a part of the daily call to prayer shouted for centuries from Muslim minarets around the world. That remarkable and well-traveled man of British letters, Rudyard Kipling, left his impression of hearing this chant in faraway India:

“*Allahu akbar*” [“Allah is most great”]—then a pause while another muezzin somewhere in the direction of the Golden Temple takes up the call: “*Allahu akbar.*” Again and again, four times in all, and from the bedsteads a dozen men have risen up already. “I bear witness that there is no god but God.” What a splendid cry it is, the proclamation of the creed that brings men out of their beds by scores at midnight! Once again he thunders through the same phrase, shaking with the vehemence of his voice: And then, far and near, the night rings with “Muhammad is the Apostle of God.” It is as though he were flinging his defiance to the far-off horizon, where the summer lightning plays and leaps like a bared sword. . . . Christian churches may compromise with images and chapels where the unworthy or abashed can traffic with accessible saints. . . . Islam has but one pulpit and one stark affirmation—living or dying, only one—and where men have repeated that in red-hot belief through the centuries, the air still shakes to it.⁷

Salat

Five times a day—just before dawn, at noon, at midafternoon, just after sunset, and again sometime around midnight—the devout Muslim is required to bow down before God in the direction of the Great Mosque of Mecca. The word *mosque* (*masjid* in Arabic) means “place of prostration” or “house of prayer.” Every mosque in the world has a niche in the wall called the *mihrab*, which points in the direction of Mecca, the holy city toward which all Muslims face as they pray. In the world in which Islam arose, one bowed abjectly in prostration in the presence of a great king or imperial sovereign. When Muslims bow in this way before Allah, they are acknowledging the sovereignty and majesty of God.

The theme of divine transcendence is undergirded by the ritual washing of the hands, face, and feet. This cleansing is done before beginning *Salat*—and preferably by using running water. The worshiper also uses a prayer mat to keep him free from contamination and to provide a sacred space for prostration. Islam has no holy

day of rest comparable to the Jewish Sabbath or the Christian Sunday. But Friday is the day designated for congregational prayer in the mosque, which Muslim men (but not women) are obliged to attend. As part of their daily prayer requirement, Muslims recite the seven verses of the opening chapter of the Quran:

In the Name of God, the merciful Lord of mercy,
Praise be to God, the Lord of all being,
The merciful Lord of mercy,
Master of the Day of Judgment!
You alone we serve, and to You alone come we for aid.
Guide us in the straight path,
The path of those whom You have blessed,
Not of those against whom there is displeasure,
Nor of those who go astray.⁸

Zakat

Sometimes translated “poor tax” or “charity,” *Zakat* refers to the obligatory almsgiving required of all devout Muslims. According to tradition, 2.5 percent of one’s annual income must be given for *Zakat*. The Quran itself (9:60) indicates how these funds should be used: “Alms shall be only for the poor and the destitute, for those that are engaged in the management of alms and those whose hearts are sympathetic to the faith, for the freeing of slaves and debtors, for the advancement of God’s cause, and for the traveler in need.”

In addition to the required alms, Muslims can also give freewill offerings for the sake of the poor. This kind of generosity is encouraged in Islam. Muhammad himself was an orphan who grew up in poverty and never forgot the importance of caring for those in need.

The stewardship of a blessed life remains one of the major themes in the Quran: “Did he not find you an orphan and give you shelter? . . . Did he not find you poor and enrich you? Therefore do not wrong the orphan, nor chide away the beggar. But proclaim the goodness of your Lord” (93:6–11). On the other hand, a life

of selfishness and disregard for others will lead inevitably to damnation. The Quran warns that each soul is the hostage of its own deeds. On the final day of judgment, “those on the right hand . . . will ask the sinners: ‘What has brought you into Hell?’ They will reply: ‘We never prayed, nor did we ever feed the destitute.’” (74:38–44).

Sawm

Sawm refers to the duty to participate in the annual fast that takes place each year during Ramadan, the ninth month in the Islamic calendar. Because the Muslim year is lunar, this fast can occur at various seasons of the year. The purpose of the fast is to cultivate discipline and self-control and to encourage contemplation on the meaning of true submission to the will of God. Fasting during Ramadan lasts from the first light of morning to the setting of the sun at night. During each day of the month, Muslims are expected to abstain completely from all food and drink (even the swallowing of spittle is forbidden). Sexual contact is also forbidden. The fast emphasizes the equality of all persons before God, as no one (except children, pregnant women, and those who are sick) is exempted from its requirements.

But why fast during Ramadan? Muslims believe that the angel Gabriel first revealed the Quran to Muhammad during this month. This event is referred to in the Quran itself and is celebrated each year during Ramadan on what is called “the Night of Destiny”:

In the month of Ramadan, the Quran was revealed, a book of guidance for mankind with proofs of guidance distinguishing right from wrong. Therefore whoever of you is present in that month let him fast. But he who is ill or on a journey shall fast a similar number of days later on. God desires your well-being, not your discomfort. He desires you to fast the whole month so that you may magnify God and render thanks to him for giving you his guidance.

2:185

Hajj

Hajj, the final pillar of Islam, is the famous pilgrimage to Mecca. Pilgrimage is a part of many religious traditions, including Christianity. As a young man, Jesus himself made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem with Joseph and Mary. Throughout the centuries many Christian pilgrims have visited the sacred sites of the Holy Land, as well as countless other places associated with martyrs, saints, and reformers. Every Muslim believer is expected to make the *Hajj* to Mecca at least once in a lifetime, unless prevented for reasons of health or financial need. In Malaysia, the first prize in a national lottery is an all-expense-paid *Hajj* to Mecca!

Muslims throughout the world pray toward Mecca every day. Once every year, during the twelfth Islamic month, some two million Muslims from every corner of the globe gather there to perform the various rituals associated with the pilgrimage. Why Mecca? It was there that Muhammad was born. It was also there that he cleansed the cube-shaped shrine called the *Kabah*, which formerly housed the many idols of Arabia. This was the very spot, according to Muslim belief, where Abraham offered Ishmael—not Isaac, as the Bible says. At the last moment God provided a substituted animal to die in the place of Ishmael. Significantly, the rituals of *Hajj* still include a literal sacrificing of animals, although most Muslim scholars deny that this act has any expiatory significance. There is no place for atonement or redemption in the Islamic understanding of salvation. Some Muslims believe that every step taken toward Mecca in the course of the pilgrimage blots out a sin committed in the past, while to die en route is to be included in the number of the martyrs.

The Role of the Prophet

The question Jesus once asked others about himself—“What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” (Matthew 22:47)—must also be asked from a different point of view of everyone who studies the central figure in the rise of Islam: “What do you think about Muhammad? Whose prophet is he?” From

the standpoint of comparative theology, Jesus and Muhammad are not really comparable in this way. For Muslims, Jesus is the virgin-born miracle-working Messiah and prophet of God, but not the divine Son of God. Christians, they think, are guilty of the worst kind of *shirk* because they attribute divinity to Jesus, Mary's son. Muslims believe that Jesus was "no more than a servant on whom we bestowed favor," as the Quran quotes God as saying (43:59). No Muslim would think of assigning divine status to Muhammad. It is not the Prophet but the Quran itself that holds a similar place in Islam to that of Jesus Christ in Christianity. The key difference is this: According to the Bible, the eternal Word of

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God was made *flesh* and lived on earth as a Jewish peasant named Jesus; for Muslims, the eternal Word of God was made *text* in the holy Quran revealed to Muhammad.

From another perspective, however, it is impossible not to compare Jesus and Muhammad, for—despite the radically different roles they play in the two religions—they are the key historical figures whose life and work marked a new beginning for Christianity and Islam, respectively. The *Shahada* itself irrevocably links the confession of the one God with the mission of his final Prophet. As a distinguished Muslim scholar once said, there can be "no genuine obedience and loyalty to God without obedience and loyalty to His Messenger; nor can there be true acceptance of the testimony that there is no god but Allah without also accepting Muhammad as His messenger."⁹ In the Quran, Muhammad himself stresses both his common humanity with all other persons and his unique role as the channel of definitive revelation: "Say: 'I am but a mortal like you; it has been revealed to me that your God is one God'" (18:110). Muslims believe, then, that Muhammad was a human being just like anyone else. At the same time they regard him as unique within the human family because, in the providence of God, he became the

vessel through whom God's perfect revelation was given to the Arabs and, through them, to the whole human race. Muhammad was the channel through which the true will of God has been made known in the faith of *Islam*.

Throughout the centuries Christians and Muslims have strongly disagreed about the character and personality of Muhammad. Muslims always speak of Muhammad with great love, respect, and gratitude. They never speak or write his name without adding the acclamation "Peace be upon him." They regard him as the seal of the prophets (33:40), a lamp shining in the darkness (33:46), the perfect exemplar for all human beings (33:21), and a blessing for the whole world (21:107).

Unlike the New Testament, which tells us the story of Jesus, the Quran provides almost no information about Muhammad's life. The first biography of Muhammad was recorded by Muhammad Ibn Ishaq more than one hundred years after the prophet's death. Some modern scholars have undertaken a sort of "quest for the historical Muhammad" because they have found it difficult to disentangle the historical core of his life and work from the many stories and legends that have circulated about him.¹⁰ To cite just a few, it is said that his mother, Aminah, experienced no pain during pregnancy and childbirth, that on one occasion the stones in the streets of Mecca cried out in greeting as he passed near them, that water flowed from between his fingers, and that a wolf once spoke in praise of him. These and other stories about Muhammad were passed on orally and collected in a group of sayings and traditions known as *hadiths*. These sayings cover many aspects of the spiritual life not recorded in the Quran itself. They are held in great respect by devout Muslims. At the same time, there is debate among Muslim scholars as to how literally one should interpret some of these reputed events in the prophet's life.

Even laying aside some of the extreme claims made by later traditions, no Christian can believe what Islam teaches about Muhammad without becoming a Muslim. For example, Muslims interpret Jesus' promise (in John 14:16) to send "another Counselor" to guide the disciples into all truth as a prediction of the

coming of Muhammad rather than a prophecy about the Holy Spirit. How could one make such a claim? The Greek word for “Counselor” (“Comforter” or “Helper” in some translations) is *paraclētos*. Muslim scholars suggest, however, that the original word in this text from John’s gospel was *perichylos* (“praised one”). This is the Greek translation of the word *Ahmad*, one of the names given to the prophet in the Quran (61:6). There Jesus is quoted as saying, “I am the apostle of Allah to you . . . giving the good news of an apostle who will come after me, his name being Ahmad.” There are no variant readings—nor any other evidence—for this supposed corruption of the text in any of the more than 5,000 manuscripts of the Greek New Testament that have survived. However, this example illustrates an important point in the debate between Christians and Muslims over the authority of the Bible.

As we have seen, Muslim theology recognizes Moses, David, and Jesus as authentic prophets of God and precursors of Muhammad. The Pentateuch, the book of Psalms, and the Gospels are also acknowledged as holy books divinely inspired by God. But the trustworthiness of these writings is undermined by the claim that Jewish and Christian scholars have tampered with them, changing their meaning, as the dispute over Jesus’ promise in John 14:16 illustrates. On the other hand, the Quran, Muslims say, is God’s perfect revelation, which supercedes all the sacred writings that came before it. The Quran itself does not explicitly teach that the previous Scriptures were corrupted and can no longer be trusted. This theory was developed by later Muslim scholars to explain away the irreconcilable differences between the Quran and the Bible. As W. Montgomery Watt, the great scholar of Islam, put it, “The formulation of this doctrine [the so-called corruption of the Bible] is the first important example of what became a normal practice among Muslim scholars, namely, the exaltation of theological dogma above historical fact.”¹¹

What is at stake in this debate is not merely a tussle over hermeneutics but rather a fundamental cleavage in the understanding of religious authority. Christians cannot accept the claims made on behalf of Muhammad by Islamic theology, but is there a

sense in which we can recognize the many true things he did say as a genuine revelation from God? To put the question another way, is it possible to arrive at a more positive assessment of Muhammad than traditional Christian calumnies have allowed?

In the Middle Ages, for example, many people thought that Muhammad was a former cardinal of the church who got mad and started Islam because he was not elected pope. Another vulgar, widely circulated story was that Muhammad had been killed by pigs while he was in the process of urinating. Neither story had any basis in fact, but many Christians repeated and believed these stories for many years.¹² Such stories are no longer repeated by responsible Christian apologists (such as Norman Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, who deal extensively with Muhammad [and how he is perceived by both Christians and Muslims] in their book *Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross*).¹³

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Colin Chapman, a British scholar of Islam, has identified four possible responses Christians can make to Muhammad and his message:

1. Some Christians believe that Islam was inspired by the devil and that the angel Gabriel, who is said to have transmitted the Quran to Muhammad, was really a demonic spirit. They believe that Muhammad himself was the incarnation of the antichrist, or the false prophet, whose coming was foretold in the Scriptures. Some even claim that the Quran, like the Book of Mormon, should not be read by true believers, lest their minds be corrupted and led astray by its evil teachings.
2. While not denying that Satan has the ability to masquerade as an angel of light and to foster resistance to the gospel, a second view refuses to single out Islam as a special case of demonic control. The Bible says that the *whole world*, not

just the Islamic world, lies in the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19). Moreover, there is much in the Quran that is consistent with God's revelation in the Bible. We should claim common ground where possible but also help Muslims to understand their need for Jesus and to see the truth that redemption is found only in him.

3. Another perspective points to Muhammad's role in rejecting the polytheism and idolatry of his native Arab culture. The monotheism of Islam is compared to that of the Old Testament, although the nature of God in the Bible is not identical to that of Allah in the Quran. It is also recognized that the covenant blessings given to Israel were fulfilled by Jesus Christ and not reserved for a later installment in the divine economy. One expression of this view states that we should think of Muhammad as being "*chronologically* A.D. but *informationally* B.C." ¹⁴
4. A fourth view regards Muhammad as a genuine prophet for Muslims. It states that he was indeed the messenger of God for the Arab peoples in his day, and that Islam is as equally valid a pathway to God as the Christian pathway revealed in the Bible and in Jesus Christ. ¹⁵ Many who hold this view see no reason why Muslims should be persuaded to become followers of Jesus, because Islam provides all they need in order to know and serve God.

How shall we assess these four viewpoints? The first alternative gives the devil too much credit. It ignores the fact that human beings in their fallen, depraved state (whether they live in New York City or Mecca) are fully capable of straying from the straight path—quite apart from special demonic intervention. This view also ignores the fact that God reveals himself in nature, as well as to the consciences of all persons everywhere. As Paul argues in Romans 1 and 2, this general revelation is the basis of our accountability, of our being "without excuse," before God (Romans 1:20). Paul does not teach that this natural knowledge of God issues in a saving relationship with God. But he does say that God "has not

left himself without testimony” in every human heart (Acts 14:17; see also Acts 17:27–30). Thus when Muhammad destroyed the man-made idols in Mecca and urged the people there to turn to the one and only creator God, he did something in keeping with biblical faith, even if this act—and the religious system that grew out of it—cannot be considered a part of God’s sacred covenant history with his people. But to say this does not mean we must adopt the fourth option above—a perspective that relativizes the truth-claims of both Christianity and Islam. It also undermines the missionary commitment of both religions. Options two and three seem to me more in keeping with both the facts of history and the integrity of the biblical gospel.

Turning Points

Before we leave the story of Muhammad, we would do well to review some of the major events and turning points in his life:

- 570 – Muhammad was born in the trading city of Mecca. Orphaned at an early age, he was brought up by his uncle, Abu Talib, who took him on trips to Syria and taught him the trade of being a caravan manager. In those days Muhammad was known as *al-Amin*, the “trustworthy one.”
- 595 – Muhammad married Khadijah, a rich widow twenty-five years older than he was. They had several children including a daughter named Fatima. Fatima would later marry Ali, one of the successors (called caliphs) of Muhammad after his death.
- 610 – During the month of Ramadan in this year, while meditating in a cave on Mount Hira, near Mecca, Muhammad received the first of the revelations that would eventually become the Quran. Muslims believe that the angel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad with a command: “Recite!” (96:1; literally, “make *qur’an*”). These visitations continued intermittently over the next twenty-three years. Muhammad, who could neither read nor write, simply recited to others what he had

been told. These sayings were memorized and written down by others, and in this way the Quran came into being.

- 619 – A year marked by the death of his uncle and his beloved wife, Khadija, with whom he had shared a monogamous union for twenty-four years. Later he would marry a number of other women, exceeding by divine permission the four wives allotted to a man in the Quran (33:50).
- 620 – Muhammad’s Night Journey (17:1). In this experience Muhammad is said to have been taken by Gabriel to Jerusalem, where the Dome of the Rock now stands. Traveling on his fabulous steed, Buraq, Muhammad ascended, one by one, into the seven heavens, where he met the prophets who had come before him—Moses, Jesus, Abraham, and Adam. As he approached the veil of Divine Unity beyond the seventh heaven, he was granted a vision of God on his throne, an experience of blinding radiance and light. Muslims differ as to whether the Night Journey was a literal event or something more mystical in nature. Muslims commemorate it every year. This helps to explain why Jerusalem is regarded as a holy city by Muslims as well as by Christians and Jews. Some scholars have suggested that Muhammad’s Night Journey is comparable to the transfiguration of Jesus. Both events include an experience of divine luminescence and an encounter with prophets of an earlier dispensation.
- 622 – The year of Muhammad’s migration, or flight to Medina. Muhammad’s preaching of the one God proved a threat that led to conflict with the leaders of Mecca, who were making great profit from their sponsorship of idol worship. The *Hijra*, or flight to Medina, marked a new beginning for Muhammad and his followers. From that time on, Islam was defined as a political and military (as well as a spiritual) community. Muhammad was not only the prophet but also the ruler and commander-in-chief of his armed forces. Muhammad himself led military campaigns and was once

wounded on the battlefield. Although he suffered some defeats, he experienced a great victory over his enemies at the battle of Badr in 624. On another occasion, he ordered the execution of several hundred Jewish men who had tried to overthrow the Muslim regime in Medina. The year 622 is the birthday of Islam, and all subsequent history is designated A.H. (“After the Hijra”).

- 630 – In this year (8 A.H.), having consolidated his power in Medina, Muhammad marched on Mecca with an army of ten thousand men. The city surrendered, assuring the ascendancy of Islam in Arabia. Muhammad ordered the pagan idols in the *Kabah* to be destroyed. He personally participated in this iconoclastic cleansing by breaking, with his own hands, a pigeon-idol made of wood that was hanging from the roof of the shrine.
- 632 – Muhammad died and was buried in Medina. The first four caliphs who succeeded him consolidated the power of the Muslim community. They were Abu Bakr (632–34), Umar (634–44), Uthman (644–56), and Ali (656–61). In 732, by the time Charles Martel drove back the Muslim armies at the battle of Poitiers (a city about two hundred miles south of Paris), exactly one century after Muhammad’s death, Islam had become a dominant political force in the world. But a debate over Muhammad’s successor led to a major split in the Muslim world—a split that continues to this day. Sunni Muslims look back to the period of the first four “rightly guided” caliphs as an Islamic “golden age.” On the other hand, Shiites (from *shiat ali*, Ali’s Party) regard the first three caliphs as usurpers who should have allowed Ali, Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law, to succeed him in the first place. Other theological, legal, and political divergences have driven these two branches of Islam further apart. Today some 90 percent of the world’s Muslims are Sunnis; the Shiites are concentrated mostly in Iran.