

# The Basics of Islam, presented to Oblate Partners, Feb. 10-12, San Antonio, TX.

Scott Woodward, DMin  
Oblate School of Theology

## I. Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Dialog

- The goal of ecumenical dialog is Christian Unity. We are looking and praying for the way to be one.
- Inter-religious dialog is different. We are not seeking to form one gigantic, global, intergalactic religion.
- Rather it is about sharing our faith with others so they can understand who we are and how we address the great, ultimate questions of life.
- Inter-Religious Dialog therefore, is considered part of the *Mission Ad gentes*, to those who do not know Christ.

## II. Why be interested in Inter-Religious Dialog?

- *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions) lists some:
  - Promote Unity and Harmony
  - Seek answers to universal questions
  - Church rejects nothing that is True and Good
- What does *NA* say about Islam?
  - Almost nothing
  - *They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to human beings; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting. (NA #3)*
  - Ends by saying our history is not good so we need to start over.

## III. Six Basic Beliefs of Islam

- **God:** God is completely Other, has no partner, no son. God is the only True God, all other deities are false. God is all-loving, all merciful, all-knowing. Any notion that God is incarnate or has any human attribute is considered blasphemous.

- **Angels:** Creatures who worship God, act by God's command, and serve as intermediaries between God and humans. Gabriel is an angel who brought the Quran to Mohammed.
- **Belief in God's Revealed Books:** These include the Hebrew Scriptures, the Christian Scriptures, and the Quran. All are considered sacred texts with the Quran being the final word and latest revelation of the prophets.
- **Belief in the prophets and messengers of God:** starting with Adam, including Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and Jesus. God's final message to humanity, a reconfirmation of the eternal message, was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. Muslims believe that Muhammad is the last prophet sent by God.
- **Belief in a Day of Judgement:** When all will be resurrected for final judgement according to their beliefs and deeds.
- **Belief in Al-Qadar or Divine Predestination:** Two things are important:
  - I. God knows everything that has happened or will happen.
  - II. Nothing happens without God willing it to be so nor does anything not happen unless God wills it to be so.

Therefore, whatever God wills to happen happens, and whatever He wills not to happen does not happen. The expression *inshallah* (if God wills) reflects this belief.

### III. Five Pillars of Islam

- **The Testimony of Faith:** *There is no God but God, and Mohammed is the Prophet of God.*
- **Prayer:** Muslims pray 5 times a day - Dawn, Noon, Mid-Afternoon, Evening, Night. Islamic prayer has a structure and is rather ritualistic. Prayer may be done almost anywhere – at work, outside, in the mosque or in the home.
- **Giving Zakat or support of the needy:** Muslims are expected to tithe 2.5% of their net worth each year
- **Fasting during the Month of Ramadan:** Fasting is abstaining from food, drink, and sexual relations from sunup to sundown. Ramadan ends with one of the two major Muslim Feasts, *Eid-Al-Fitr*.
- **The Pilgrimage to Mecca, the Hajj:** Any Muslim who is healthy and wealthy enough is obliged to make a pilgrimage to Mecca once in his or her lifetime. Every male wears a simple white gown that signifies the equality of everyone before God. The Hajj ends with the other major feast – *Eid-Al-Adha*.

#### IV. Jihad

- the personal pursuit of holiness to use Christian terminology, it describes the spiritual struggle to live faithfully

*"The best jihad [struggle] is (by) the one who strives against his own self for Allah, The Mighty and Majestic,"* Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammed)

- Holy War is a lousy but secondarily acceptable meaning of the term today although the Quran does not describe any war as "Holy"
- Jihad is holy because it is good in and of itself. War is not holy, only justified or not justified. And only God can determine if it is justified.
- There is also the understanding that jihad is the fight against unbelief or against heresy, blasphemy. It is a fight against infidels.
- Who are infidels?
  - *Surely, those who believe, those who are Jewish, the Christians, and the converts; anyone who (1) believes in God, and (2) believes in the Last Day, and (3) leads a righteous life, will receive their recompense from their Lord. They have nothing to fear, nor will they grieve.* (Quran 2:62)

Those who oppress, those who wage war against Islam, those who blaspheme, those who steal or murder, these are infidels.

#### V. Terrorist Activity

How then can someone attack innocents? By making them *Takfir* or a heretic.

Who decides what is *takfir*? This is the root of the issue according to *Khaled Abou el Fadl*

#### VI. Authority in Islam

- There is no Church per se such as we talk about in Christianity or Catholicism.
- There are no clergy similar to priests or bishops.
- There is a class of people who are known by several terms in Arabic – *'alim or ulama (pl), faqih or fuqaha (pl), mullah, shaykh (sheik), or imam.*
- These jurists issue non-binding but persuasive opinions based upon Islamic law and teaching known as *fatawa* or *fatwa* (sing). A *fatwa* may address the concern of a particular person or one of a public matter.
- In the classical Islamic age (the 9<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries CE), these jurists set strict qualifications for anyone to be able to issue a *fatwa*. The more serious the subject matter of the review, the higher the qualifications. In the contemporary

age, the institutions that enforced this system of qualifications have crumbled and disappeared. Thus today, almost anyone can appoint himself a scholar, mullah, imam, or sheik and issue *fatawa* since there is no system to prevent him from doing so.

- The competing *fatawa* make things confusing for Muslims as well as those around them. These competing *fatawa* are spread through the internet and social media having been issued by people who have no training in Islamic law. It is not so much that there is no authority in Islam but rather that anyone can be an authority.

## VII. “Puritans and Moderates”

- Abou El Fadl describes two rivers running through Islam today – Puritans and Moderates
- Puritans are the faithful descendants of Muhammad bin ‘Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism. (d.1792)
- The Wahhabist solution to the challenge of modernity was to return to the simple pure form of Islam lived by Bedouins in Arabia.
- Wahhab disliked mysticism, considering Sufism a Persian poison, he distrusted jurists who allowed for differing schools of thought, considered Shia Islam a heresy, and wanted rational thought out of Islam. Anyone who considered any of these acceptable was *takfir*, a heretic.
- Anyone who followed any form of Islam other than Wahhabism were *takfir*, infidels to be killed including Jews and Christians.
- Wahhabism promoted a doctrine of separation. Muslims should not associate with anyone who is not entirely Muslim.
- He also appealed to a questionable account from early Islam that described a Muslim leader, Abu Bakr, killing those he considered to be heretics although they followed the five pillars. Later scholars determined these writings were written by Abu Bakr’s enemies to discredit him. Wahhab ignored these studies and used Bakr’s actions as an example of what a Muslim should do to protect the faith – kill heretics. In doing so he redefined Islamic morality and allowed a cruelty not found acceptable in the time of the prophet.
- All of the “puritan” groups we hear of today, Al Qaeda, Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS, Taliban flow out of this Wahhabist belief. Once it becomes permissible to kill, then any means necessary to protect the faith from heresy soon follows and suicide bombers, killing of non-combatants, and public mutilations and killings become acceptable. This cruelty is meant to keep the unfaithful in line.
- The vast majority of Muslims fall into the moderate camp. Even there however, it is difficult for Muslims to find authentic interpretations of Islamic law. So there is confusion.

- There are some institutes that continue the traditional approach to *fatawa* – the Royal Institute of Jordan being very important. They and others came together to issue *A Common Word*. The role of such places has been weakened by the collapse of the traditional system.
- The role of women, dress codes, and other such things are covered by the rules for daily life known as *Sharia* law.

VIII. Questions?

**Some recommended texts:**

Aslan, Reza. *No god but God*. Random House: New York, 2011.

Abou el Fadl, Khaled. *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*. HarperCollins, New York, 2005.

Armstrong, Karen. *Islam: A Short History*. Random House, New York, 2002.