

FACING
ISLAM

ENGAGING
MUSLIMS

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CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE IN AN AGE OF CONFLICT

ENGAGING
MUSLIMS

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REDEMPTION  PRESS

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Published by Redemption Press, PO Box 427, Enumclaw, WA 98022

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Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the Qur'an are taken from *The Glorious Qur'an*, translated by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, TahrikeTarsile Qur'an, Inc., First English Edition, 2000.

There is no universally accepted system of numbering the verses within each surah of the Qur'an. Therefore, if one's translation differs from that used in this book, one may need to scan up to four verses before or after the verse number cited to find the correct verse.

ISBN 13: 978-1-63232-319-4

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2011933858

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INTRODUCTION

SINCE 1979, ISLAM has been thrust onto center stage in the West. There have been revolutions, several wars, acts of terrorism, bombings, sanctions, anger, discrimination, torture, hostage-taking, kidnappings, and murders. Although this time period has been peaceful by comparison with the first half of the twentieth century, it has nevertheless been an age of conflict, with Islam involved in much of it.

With these events in the forefront, it is imperative Christians understand all aspects of the challenge that Islam poses, and they realize the importance of meeting that challenge by engaging with Muslims in a constructive way. Failure to do so is not only a denial of the gospel, but will certainly result in increasing conflict, to the detriment of everyone.

Some Christians have done much to encourage dialogue, but have done so in a way that hides the hard issues. We ignore those issues partly out of fear of offending Muslims, and often because Christians do not know the answers. Sometimes we avoid these issues because Christians bear some responsibility for the conflict. In any case, avoiding the hard issues at the center of the conflict

will ultimately lead to future confrontation, no matter how peaceful the two sides would like to remain.

Other Christians have clearly spelled out some of the issues, but in a way that offends Muslims and cuts off dialogue. In this book, the theological issues at the heart of the conflict are squarely faced, but set forth in a way that encourages dialogue and understanding between Christians and Muslims.

Part One lays out the challenge that Islam presents to the world as a theology and as an ideology. This is the ideal version of Islam, to which many, but not all, Muslims aspire.

Part Two first presents the wide variety of Muslims in the world today, from those who strive to fulfill all the commands of Islam literally, to those who take great license with the foundational texts. Then, starting with our attitudes as Western Christians, the second part of this book shows how we can engage Muslims in meaningful discourse, beginning with our common ground as monotheists.

PART ONE



FACING ISLAM

CHAPTER ONE

FACING THE CHALLENGE

ISLAM CHALLENGES CHRISTIANITY, as well as all other religions, because it is a theological rival for the soul of every person. It also challenges the non-Muslim world in general because it is at the same time a geopolitical rival for social and cultural power. The first element of the challenge of Islam is that it presents a two-pronged challenge: theological and geo-political.

The theological challenge consists of two elements: the missionary nature of the Islamic religion, and the modern rebirth of fundamentalist Islam. The geopolitical challenge also consists of two elements: recent demographic trends and the new oil wealth of some Islamic countries.

A challenge is not by itself a negative concept. One athlete might challenge another to a contest, and in the process both will improve their performances. In a democracy, a political challenge gives the voters a chance to hear both sides of an issue and make an informed decision. In the realm of religion, a challenge forces both sides to prove their points by appealing to accepted authoritative texts and to logic. Without challenges, religious charlatans could deceive and defraud millions of people. In this spirit of inquiry

and examination, we must face the challenges that Islam presents in the present age.

Combined Religion and Ideology—A Dual Challenge

Islam challenges all non-Islamic beliefs and political systems because it is both a religion and a political ideology. In contrast, Judaism today is not a theocratic system. Zionism is a geopolitical movement that is part of Judaism, but it is limited to the Holy Land and does not apply to any other place. Among Hindus, Nepal was a Hindu kingdom, but has now become officially secular, and India, where most Hindus live, has been officially secular since its founding in 1948. Buddhist kingdoms have existed, but none have not been militant in spreading Buddhism.

Christianity today does not have a political ideology. Although there have been Christian kingdoms starting with Edessa and Armenia in the second and third centuries and the Roman Empire after Constantine (reigned 306–337 A.D.) gradually made it the state religion, most Christians today consider the church and the state two separate realms. The separation of religion and state is supported in the Bible. Jesus said “My kingdom is not of this world.”¹ He also said “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”² Christian citizens should have the same voice in governing as any other citizen, and laws governing civil conduct should be based on moral concepts from the Scriptures, but no major Christian group today calls for theocracy. Theology and proper worship are not decided by the government, but by believers acting through their churches.

Islam is not this way. Although the Qur’an does not specifically talk about government, it does say that the life of Muhammad is the supreme example for every aspect of the life of Muslims today.³ Muhammad was not only the religious leader of his people, but also their political and military leader after he moved his ministry to

Medina in 622 A.D. His example was followed by the four “rightly guided caliphs” who succeeded Muhammad in leadership. Sunni Muslims (85 percent of all Muslims) consider there was a succession of such leaders that lasted until 1924, when the last caliph, the religious and political leader of the Ottoman Empire, abdicated. This is one reason for the discomfort Muslims feel in contemporary society; they are not being governed by a religious leader—a caliph. Many fundamentalist Islamic groups have recently been calling for the restoration of the theocratic caliphate.

Some popular scholars challenge the idea that Islam necessarily combines religion and politics. Some, like John Esposito, are employed by fundamentalist Muslims, so their conclusions are suspect.⁴ Others, such as Karen Armstrong, see the great number of secular Muslims today and incorrectly conclude that Islamic doctrine is secular, not theocratic. Orthodox theology in any religion is not decided by majority vote, but by adherence to historic norms as set forth in their scriptures.

Others agree that political Islam, recently dubbed “Islamism,” is a problem, but also say it is only one of many interpretations of Islam, and that it can be marginalized as being “extreme.” Daniel Pipes said recently in an interview that “there are many different ways of understanding what it means to be a Muslim. One can be a Sufi, a mystic, one can be someone who lives by the law in a very strict way, one can be a nominal Muslim, who does not pay that much attention to his faith; all these and other ways are possible within the religion of Islam.”⁵

Some people in the former Soviet Union call themselves Muslims and yet say they are atheists. In the same way there are people who call themselves Christians who do not believe in the virgin birth and other basic Christian doctrines. But if we say that labels have any meaning, when we talk about the nature of a philosophy or a religion, we must describe it according to its recognized ideal state, not according to how some people may be

imperfectly practicing it. Secularism or atheism is definitely not part of the definition of Islam according to the Qur'an. Secularists would fit the definition of "hypocrites," which are mentioned in the Qur'an thirty-seven times. They "utter with their mouths a thing which is not in their hearts."⁶ They do not keep their word to God, and pretend to believe.⁷ Muslims are commanded to "choose not friends from them" and, if they continue to oppose Muslims, "then take them and kill them wherever ye find them."⁸ Clearly, according to any reasonable interpretation of the Qur'an, an atheist or a secularist position cannot truly be Islamic.

Pipes probably knows this separation of religion and politics is not Qur'anic, but his fallback position is that "you'd have to adopt my point of view, because a Western government cannot fight Islam. Ours are not crusader states. Therefore, you have to fight the ideology of Islamism, not the religion of Islam. ... We can't fight a religion. So if it's reduced to a religion, then we lack the tools to protect ourselves."⁹ Pipes *knows* a purely secular version of Islam is not truly Islamic, but he *says* it is to have a practical strategy to promote. In his view, we have to maintain (falsely) that theocracy is not a central part of real Islam in order to fight it by promoting the secular version.

This strategy has the advantage of avoiding the appearance that the West is declaring all one billion Muslims in the world its enemies. However, it confuses people in the West who want to agree that Islam itself is not political, but then see highly regarded, official Islamic theologians supporting theocracy by referencing authoritative Islamic texts. It sidetracks honest dialogue by obscuring the real nature of Islam.

The Islamic (Qur'anic) view of religion and politics is a challenge to the Western idea of the secular state. Even those Western countries that are still, in theory, "Christian," such as Great Britain and the Scandinavian countries, have become essentially secular in the last fifty years. The United States, founded as a country

with no officially established religion, has become increasingly secular in recent decades, with overtly Christian symbols removed from most public spaces or combined with secular symbols or the symbols of other religions. In contrast, there is increasing ferment in Islamic countries to widen the role of Islam in the government. Even in Turkey, the prime example of a secular Muslim country, the secular nature of the republic is under increasing pressure from resurgent Islamic political parties and their supporters in the general population.

Many aspects of Western society would be totally changed under Islamic (Sharia) law. Freedom of speech and of the press would be curtailed by the Islamic prohibition against criticizing the Qur'an, Muhammad, and Islam itself.¹⁰ Freedom of religion would consist only of the freedom to become a Muslim, but not for a Muslim to become something else.¹¹ A strict dress code would be instituted, requiring women to be very modestly dressed in public, and men not to wear shorts. According to various Hadith (written, authoritative Islamic traditions), non-Muslims could not dress like Muslims, but would have to wear particular clothing identifying their non-Muslim status. The age of marriage for women would be lowered to the age of puberty, since Muhammad married his wife Aisha at that age.¹² Women and men unrelated to them would not be allowed to mix in public or private. In business, interest on loans would not be allowed. The punishment for theft would be amputation of a hand, and for adultery, death by stoning.¹³ If strict, literal Sharia were imposed, no art depicting humans or animals would be allowed, which would mean no cinema.¹⁴ Instrumental music would be prohibited.¹⁵ Non-Muslims in the country would have to be "brought low" under the Muslims, which would mean second-class status.¹⁶ Virtually every aspect of modern life would be affected.

Specifically, the challenge is this: How should Western societies relate to Islam—as a religion that is protected by law, or as an

ideology subject to restriction if it seeks to change or overthrow the existing order? If both, then by what criteria can we separate political from religious functions in a religion that denies such a demarcation? Should, for example, a sermon in a mosque that calls for the peaceful abrogation of the U.S. Constitution and its replacement by Shariah (Islamic) law be considered religious or political? Does a sermon that calls for the violent overthrow of the government if it is not changed peacefully constitute protected speech under the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution or under international law? Should an Islamic organization that calls for specific political changes continue to have tax-exempt, charitable status? These and many other questions must be answered in order to meet this aspect of the challenge.

Islam: A Missionary Religion and Challenge to All Other Faiths

From the first recitations of Muhammad, Islam has specifically challenged both Christianity and Judaism. Classic Islamic theology teaches that Islam is the final, perfected version of the religion of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and Jesus. Many Muslims are sincerely mystified why Jews and Christians do not recognize the logic of Islam as the successor religion and become Muslims.

The Qur'an challenges the "People of the Book"—Jews and Christians: "O People of the Book! There hath come to you our Apostle, revealing to you much that ye used to hide in the Book, and passing over much (that is now unnecessary): There hath come to you from God a (new) light and a perspicuous Book, wherewith God guideth all who seek His good pleasure to ways of peace and safety, and leadeth them out of darkness, by His Will, unto the light—guideth them to a Path that is Straight."¹⁷ This and many other passages declare both Judaism and Christianity to be superseded, and call on Jews and Christians to become Muslims.

Islam is also a challenge to believers in other religions and to those with no religion. The Qur'an reserves its harshest language for atheists or unbelievers (*kafir*, plural *kufaar*), using this word 476 times. Aside from God's eventual punishment of them in the next world ("Ye shall be overcome and gathered into Hell"), Muslims are to "smite ... their necks and smite all their fingertips off them" in this world if they do not become Muslims.¹⁸ There are numerous verses in early suras that indicate some tolerance for other monotheists such as Christians and Jews, but there is little tolerance for atheists.

Polytheists (Arabic: *mushrik*) such as the pagan Meccans in Muhammad's day and Hindus today are also condemned in at least 161 verses of the Qur'an in the strongest terms. The conflict in India and Pakistan between Muslims and Hindus is evidence that many Muslims still take these verses literally.

Today, many millions of dollars are expended by Islamic foundations for the purpose of *da'wah*. This literally means "proclamation" or "summons" and is the Islamic equivalent to the Christian word "evangelism." Much of this is directed at converting Christians, as can be seen by the literature produced and the locations of their ministries. Numerous tracts explore themes such as "Jesus in the Qur'an" or "Muhammad in the Bible," which are obviously written for a Christian audience.

Clearly, Muhammad believed Jews and Christians who lived in his day should have followed the latest revelation from God and become Muslims. Similar to Christians, Muslims believe God has progressively revealed Himself through history. However, rather than events and new revelations fulfilling or explaining more fully the previous revelations, Islamic theology teaches new revelations can replace and abrogate what came before.¹⁹ According to this doctrine, the Qur'an abrogates both the Old and the New Testaments in any case where they differ.

Offshoots of Christianity in the West are very zealous in their efforts to make converts, including the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, each having millions of members. A few other religions such as the Hare Krishna Hindu sect actively seek converts around the world. But for the first time, Christianity is now facing a very numerous (over one billion adherents) and powerful worldwide competitor for the allegiance of people that is also "evangelistic." This is a serious challenge, the likes of which Christianity has not seen for a long time.

The Rebirth of Fundamentalist Islam

The rule of Islam expanded rapidly through military and political action from the time of Muhammad's flight (*higera*) to Medina in 622 until the end of the Umayyad Caliphate in 750. In the West, the Islamic conquest of Europe was stopped in a battle at Tours in France in 732. In the East, Islamic armies penetrated Central Asia and India, defeating both Chinese and Indian armies. There was a pause in Islamic military expansion during the Crusades and the Mongol invasion, but then another period of military expansion, particularly in southeastern Europe, took place under the Ottoman Empire, starting about 1300. This empire reached its zenith in 1683 at the second siege of Vienna. From then until recent decades, Islam, as an expansionistic political and military force, was weaker than the European powers, and therefore quiet.

On the doctrinal side, from the 1300s until 1918, Central Asian (Turkic) Muslims controlled most of the heartland of Islam, and lead Islamic expansion. The Turkic peoples follow the Hanafi school of Islam, which is the most lenient and flexible of the four Sunni schools of Islamic law. As a result, the Hanbali school, the most radical, nearly became extinct. But in 1745, a man from Najd in the center of Arabia named Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab started a revival movement based on the Hanbali school, which teaches the

most literal interpretation of Islamic texts. He made an agreement with Saud, the leader of a tribe in his area. They agreed that Wahhab would support Saud politically if Saud would support the Wahhabi brand of Islam. The house of Saud had its ups and downs, but finally in 1932 Ibn Saud conquered a number of other tribes and created the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with fundamentalist Wahhabism as its official religion.

The early part of the twentieth century saw other Islamic fundamentalist movements emerge. The Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan*) and the Salafi movement started in Egypt, and the Deobandi movement started at the city of Deoband in northern India. All these movements were aided in their development by the fact that in many Islamic countries, colonial governments weakened or destroyed the power of the traditional ruling classes. Over the centuries these rulers had adopted a pragmatic version of Islam that in many areas of life only gave lip service to Qur'anic commands. When chaotic times came during and after the struggle for independence, Muslims in various countries began to ask if there were not something basically wrong with their society. Without guidance from traditional Islamic authorities, they compared their society with the Qur'an, Hadith, and the successful history of Muhammad and early Muslim rulers—and concluded their societies were in disarray because they were insufficiently dedicated to Islam. Islamic radicalism was thus reborn.

Christianity and the West are now being confronted by a movement within Islam that is not content to let each have its own. The Qur'an says, "He it is who hath sent His messenger with the guidance and the Religion of Truth, that He may cause it to prevail over all religion, however much the idolaters may be averse."²⁰ This movement takes such verses from the Qur'an and the Hadith as literally as the first Muslims in the day of Muhammad, and intends to work so Islam becomes the dominant religion in every part of the world. The military aspect of this ideology has not been applied in

such a strong way since 1683, and the military and fundamentalist combination has not been seen in the West since the year 732. Since the West has not faced this challenge for nearly 1300 years, it appears to be a new challenge. But in reality it is an old one that has been renewed.

The Demographic Challenge

The science of demography studies where people live, how many they are, and where they are moving. In the world today we see unprecedented migrations of people. Most are emigrating from the poor and less-developed portions of the world to the more developed areas—primarily from Africa, Asia, and Latin America to Europe, North America, and Australia. Many of these migrants are Muslims. This has increased the percentage of Muslims in France to nearly 10 percent, and in other parts of Western Europe to 5–6 percent. With their high birthrate and continued immigration, it has been estimated that in only a few decades, several Western European countries could have a majority Muslim population. By 2014, the three largest cities in the Netherlands may be majority Muslim.

This sounds impossible, but the basis for the trend is simple. The average number of children per family among native Europeans in most countries is between 1.2 and 1.8, significantly below the replacement level of 2.1. So in the next generation there will be little more than half the number of native Europeans. In contrast, the Muslim immigrants in these same countries have an average of 3.5 children per family. This by itself will double their population in one generation. But liberal immigration policies in most European Union countries mean that the parents can send each of these three or four children to their “homeland,” where it is likely they have never been, to be married to a spouse chosen by relatives who still live there, and bring the spouse back to Europe. Among many

immigrant groups, this is the preferred method to take care of the next generation and preserve their religion and culture in a new land. It is possible in one generation for the Muslim population not just to double, but to nearly quadruple, while native Europeans decrease by half.

North America, being a continent of immigrants, presents a different story. As with Muslims today, previous waves of immigrants have been encouraged to assimilate rather than remain in separate communities. Immigration rules are more stringent, making it more difficult to bring in spouses for immigrant children. It is also farther from the Muslim countries and thus more expensive to get there. So the population of Muslims is only about 2 percent in the U.S. and also in Canada. Further, the number of Muslims is increasing by only 4 to 6 percent per year in the U.S. and 9 percent in Canada, only marginally higher than the increase of the non-Islamic population. Nevertheless, Islamic voices are increasingly being heard in North American society. There are now two Muslim U.S. congressmen.

The challenge is not that Muslims are simply present in Western countries in increasing numbers. The challenge exists when Muslims are not assimilating into the societies where they have immigrated. Not only are they not becoming Christians in great numbers, but many of them are also not absorbing other aspects of the culture of their host countries, especially in Europe.

Some European countries make it difficult for any immigrant to assimilate. Welfare systems segregate all new immigrants from the local population in government-owned housing. In many cases the local population has not welcomed new immigrants. A survey revealed that most Germans did not think the Turkish immigrants living among them could, or should ever, become German citizens. European countries became what they are today through a long period of national consolidation in which citizenship, ethnic identity, language, culture, and often religion, all became one. To be a Frenchman is to speak French, be at least a nominal Catholic,

have French ancestors, eat French food, and drink French wine. Those whose first language, ancestors, religion, and cuisine do not fit this profile are not thought of as completely French by other French people, no matter what their passports say.

In some European countries, government policies that encourage “multiculturalism” perpetuate the lack of assimilation. Immigrants are encouraged to keep the language, religion, and customs of their former homeland.²¹ Isolation from the broader society is increased. It is one thing to preserve ethnic food preferences, wear native costumes during annual festivals, and attend a traditional church or mosque. But it is another to maintain a completely separate existence characterized by antipathy toward the majority culture. The Amish in America are completely separate, but they do not exhibit antipathy toward the majority culture.

On their part, some Muslim immigrants do not wish to be assimilated. The radical Muslims look on many aspects of Western culture with disdain, and urge (or sometimes even force) their less radical fellow immigrants to follow suit. Some observers say young Muslims in Germany today are less assimilated than their parents or grandparents, partly because of the impact of recent, more radical immigrants.

This demographic and cultural change is a challenge to Western culture that must be faced. If Muslim immigrants and their Western hosts do not engage each other on a significant level, then xenophobic, nationalistic elements and other fanatics on both sides will collide in the future, to the detriment of everyone.

New Oil Wealth

The political and economic power of Islam in the world reached a low point after World War I, when every Islamic country except Turkey and Iran was under the domination of Western, nominally Christian states, and most Muslims were desperately poor and

powerless. The anti-colonial phase following World War II freed most Muslims from Western political domination, but they were still very poor. Arabs of the Persian Gulf area eked out a living diving for pearls, fishing, and growing dates.

Since the steep rise of oil prices in 1973, this has dramatically changed. Some Muslim governments have made billions of dollars selling oil to Western countries thirsty for energy. The recent rise of new consumers in China and India, together with production declines in older oil fields, has driven up the price to unprecedented levels, even correcting for inflation.

This new wealth has not only made many Muslims wealthy, but it has given them the opportunity to spread Islam around the globe. Saudi Arabian and other Arab governments, as well as foundations funded by members of royal families and other wealthy Middle Eastern Muslims, have funded the construction of thousands of mosques, from Central Asia to South Africa, and from North America to Indonesia. Mosques are built in areas that have few Muslims, such as Uganda and other central African countries, with the idea that a beautiful new building and the offering of education, and in some cases cash inducements, will result in converts to Islam.

The website of a foundation established by King Fahd of Saudi Arabia lists sixty-three mosques that were built through the foundation worldwide, most of them large, expensive buildings in major cities.²² But this is just the tip of the iceberg. Hundreds of other mosques in North America are financed through foundations controlled and funded by wealthy Saudis in and out of the royal family.²³

This is a challenge to Christianity because Christian missions do not have this magnitude of money to sponsor evangelism and the construction of church buildings. It is also a challenge to believers of every other religion, including Hinduism and Buddhism, as well

as to atheists, who are also called upon to become Muslims through these Islamic buildings and organizations.

The Fastest Growing Religion?

Many state Islam is the world's fastest growing religion. There is some truth to that statement, but it must be qualified. To start, as an extreme example, undoubtedly there exists a small sect somewhere that last year grew from ten to twenty members. That would be a growth rate of 100 percent, far surpassing any of the major religions of the world, for which even a 10 percent annual growth rate would be humanly impossible. So any statement of this sort about Islam would have to be limited to the world's major religions—including Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, or perhaps to religions that have more than a million followers, which would also include Jews, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Sikhs, and a number of others.

Secondly, the original statement could give the impression that conversions to Islam, presumably from other major religions, are causing it to grow faster than the others. This in turn creates the idea that an unofficial giant vote is being conducted in which Islam, by virtue of its superiority, is winning. But most of the increase in the numbers of Muslims worldwide results from high birthrates among Muslims, not from conversions.²⁴

So it would be correct to say that Islam is *one of* the fastest growing religions in the world, both by the increase of total adherents and by the number of converts. But by the percentage increase because of converts alone, evangelical Christianity is still by far the fastest growing major religion.

The West at the Threshold

These challenges are difficult to face because they are either new or have not been faced in many centuries. In the last two hundred years, Westerners have come to believe that secular governments are the natural order of things, and it is difficult for us to comprehend a society that is governed otherwise. After decades of apparent prosperity, it is difficult to accept we are now deep in debt to rulers with a competing ideology. Europeans believe the question of nationalities was finally dealt with in Western Europe following World War II, but now new questions about identity are being raised. Since 1648, when the Peace of Westphalia ended a century of religious conflict in Europe between Protestants and Catholics, most Europeans have come to accept their differences in this area, only now to face a new religion in their midst that regards both Protestants and Catholics as wrong.

These challenges are upon Western people now. If we do not address them in the next few years, events may proceed past a tipping point beyond which Western secular governments, as we know them, will be gone—or a serious conflict will erupt. We are now, in the second decade of the new century, on the threshold of this tipping point. Christians must step in and offer a constructive way to dialogue, based on spiritual and historical realities.