

## Roots of Islam 4 . . .

FINALLY WE NEED TO LOOK AT A CONTENTIOUS POINT—the morality of Islam, and the attitude to war and violence.

Muhammad died in 632 AD. After a series of battles with his opponents he had been able to return to Mecca (630 AD) re-establishing himself in his former home town. By this time he was well on his way also to imposing Islam on the rest of Arabia—by force mainly, not by persuasion. Further battles left him as de facto ruler of Arabia.

In the neighbouring territories (Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Iraq—all provinces of the Byzantine Empire, and all ostensibly Christian) the first warning of trouble came in 634 AD with the encroachment of Arabic raiding parties into Palestine. This quickly turned into full scale invasion. The Byzantine Empire had been massively weakened, first by a prolonged epidemic of bubonic plague that had wiped out a third of the population, and then by a devastating 25 year war against the Persians, which they had won, but only just and at huge cost. They were in no position to resist.

Palestine quickly fell to the Moslems, followed in quick succession by Syria and Iraq. Between 639 and 642 Egypt was conquered, and by 650 Persia was in Moslem hands also. Moslems were to go on and conquer the rest of North Africa and much of Spain over the next few decades, and in 713 their armies moved into India. The triumph of Islam was meteoric.

We need to understand clearly that this was first and foremost a military rather than an ideological conquest. Early Islam was not spread by Islamic missionaries going out into the surrounding territories to spread their word (though that may have followed). It was not about people being convicted of the truth of Islam. It was, first and foremost, a military conquest.

To understand the morality of Muhammad and his followers we need only look at the tribal culture in which he grew up, and which has endured until recently—and to some extent still does—in Arabia. Within the Arabic tribe there is a strict code of ethical conduct, with fixed standards of charity and mutual support. There's also a generous code of conduct to govern hospitality for individual outsiders who visit or seek refuge. But when it comes to relations with other tribes, it is (or was) totally different. Warfare was a normal part of everyday life. There was nothing wrong with fighting and killing the neighboring tribes. Vengeance and honor feuds are right and proper. If anything, it would be the failure to avenge a wrong that would be seen as a moral weakness, not the act of vengeance. If they're your enemies—kill them.

This was the culture that shaped the early development of Islam. Within the *umma* or Islamic community, the Koran might advocate brotherly concern, the giving of alms to help the less privileged, etc.; but alongside that there is scathing denunciation of those who refuse to fight. When it comes to 'the enemy'—whoever that might be interpreted to be on any particular occasion—violence and killing is the normal way. You impose your will by whatever means possible.

So we see that Muhammad may have changed the Arab conception of God, completely suppressing the old polytheism and replacing it with a monotheistic God modeled on the God of the Christians and Jews. But the morality is not new. It's just the same old morality of the desert—kill or be killed.

### Are we Christians really any better?

You can argue that through much of 'Christian' history, we've really been no better, and often a lot worse. It's easy to point to the Crusades, the Inquisition, and much else besides. This is to miss the point.

We need to distinguish between the Christianity of Jesus Christ, Paul, and to some extent the early church; and Christianity in its later, corrupted forms. We all know just how bad corrupted Christianity can get. But this tells us nothing about God or about true Christianity, and everything about the Pharisee Principle.

At the risk of oversimplification, I may say that the rot really set in at the time of Constantine, when Christianity first became the official religion of the empire. The speed of moral decline in the church hierarchy after this event was extraordinary, as 'Christians' switched from persecuted to persecutors in a scant matter of years. But it's a bit unfair to blame it all on Constantine—it would have happened anyway. Jesus predicted it, Paul predicted it. Pharisaism always resurfaces in some shape or form. It tells us nothing about Christianity. All it tells us is how corrupt the human heart can be, how active our enemy can be, and how desperately we need a saviour.

Here then we see a key difference between Islam and Christianity, right at the start. Muhammad preached a new conception of God, but there's no real advance on the moral side, just a continuation of the old tribal culture. Christianity preaches also a new conception of God, but with a new morality and inner transformation to go with it. The new morality may in practice be patchy and incomplete, but at least it's there, a testimony to the truth.

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I've met a lot of Moslems. The Arabic variety when I lived in the Middle East; and the Asian variety (very different!) on my regular trips to Indonesia and Malaysia. They are delightful people (most of them) and totally sincere in their religious beliefs. They are generally very happy to engage in dialogue about religion, much more so than most western people. And generally they try to live out their lives according to their convictions of what they think God requires.

But when I talk to them about their faith, I find most of them really know very little. Many of them, particularly in Asia, have picked up on the Christian ethical codes which they feel innately to be 'right'. They can be as shocked as any of us by mindless violence or rampant corruption. They probably see their values as being 'Islamic', without really having any clear understanding of the actual teachings of the Koran, or of the life of Muhammad. The truth is rather different.

Ignorance is the mother and father of most religious delusion. Moslems need to examine the historical roots of their own faith, just as we Christians need to be aware of our own history. They need to understand the roots of Islam, and the original teaching. We as Christians also need to understand the roots of Islam—what the Koran says, where it came from, and what values underlie it.

Islam is a Christian heresy. Let's remember that, if we remember nothing else. And then we need to get off the back foot, lay aside the defensive posture, and approach Islam by being prepared to talk with Moslems, explain to them the roots of their faith, show them how so much of Koran actually relates back to the bible, and encourage them to look at that holy book (as Muhammad repeatedly described the bible) and see what it really says.