

Understanding Islam and the Muslims

A presentation in a Church Visit

Dear friends:

Thank you for inviting me to talk to you tonight about Islam. I am sure you all recognize that interfaith religious dialogues and discussions are very important and are very beneficial. I am also certain that you recognize as well that such discussions are very difficult as they deal with sensitive issues.

(49:13)¹ "O Mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and female, and established of you nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Indeed the most honored of you in the sight of Allah (God) is (he who is) the most righteous of you. Allah (God) has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).

Basically, people have difficulty relating to foreign things; in particular, foreign ideas and foreign beliefs. They make us uncomfortable at times, and a logical result is rejection. To one who subscribes to one's own faith, other religions are certainly foreign.

My purpose tonight, God Willing, is to make Islam less foreign to you, to give you a hint to what it is about, and to clear up some of the common misunderstandings about its teachings and about the people who subscribe to it.

Before I start, I like to remind you that I am not an Islamic scholar. My only support in what I am doing tonight is the fact that I am a practicing Muslim. And, I am sure that you appreciate how difficult it is to stand before an audience to talk about a sensitive subject like tonight's, even for a university professor! And what makes my assignment harder is that I have to do it in half an hour or an hour.

In this regard, I will start by the invocation (prayer) of Moses as was revealed in the Qur'an:

(20:25-8) "(Moses) said: `Oh my Lord! expand me my chest; ease my task for me; and loosen a knot from my tongue (remove the impediment from my speech), so they may understand what I say."

My talk tonight, God Willing, is about Islam and its teaching and about Muslims and their practice of their religion. I am sure that some of you have had some experience with these subjects. And, you may have some perceived ideas and concepts about Islam and the Muslims. What I am hoping for, tonight, is that those ideas and concepts will not become a barrier to an open dialogue with a sincere attempt to realize the truth. I will be more than willing at the end of my talk to discuss any disagreements and help clarify any confusion.

POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- 1. What is Islam?*
- 2. Who is God in Islam?*
- 3. The Relationship between God and Humans.*
- 4. The Present Status of Islam and Muslims.*

1. What is Islam?

- The word Islam is an Arabic word which carries a load of meanings. The two main are submission and peace.
- Submission: Total submission to and acceptance of God and His will.
- Peace: inner peace (peace with oneself), peace with the Creator, as well as peace with all creations.
- It is through the total submission to the will of God that one reaches this form of peace.

¹ From the translation of the meanings of the Qur'an. Qur'an was revealed in Arabic. In other languages, only translation of the meanings are possible by humans. The translation by A. Yusuf Ali is used in this presentation. Qur'an consists of 114 chapters (each is called surah in Arabic), each consists of a number of verses (each is called Ayah in Arabic). The number before the colon is the chapter number and the one(s) after refer to the verse's.

- (2:112) *"Nay - whoever submits his whole self (face) to Allah and is a doer of good - he will get his reward with his Lord; On such shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve."*
- With this definition and understanding of Islam, all God's Prophets (pbuh) received the call to Islam since all of them preached the same message, i.e. of accepting God and the total submission to His Will.
 - In other words, Islam is not a new religion. What we refer to as Islam, is nothing but the final revelation of the series.
 - Islam acknowledges all previous Prophets and Messengers from God, starting with Adam (pbuh) and ending with Muhammad (pbuh). Islam acknowledges their messages as well.
 - It is a fundamental tenet of Islam to witness, with an unqualified assertion, that there is no creator, sustainer, or power except for the One God, Allah²; and that Muhammad is His final Prophet and Messenger.
 - Acceptance of God provides reason for life.
 - Acceptance of God's Will provides meaning to life.
 - Acceptance of God's Commands provides a way of life.
- (46:13) *"Verily those who say, 'our Lord is Allah,' and remain firm (on that path) on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve."*
- (13:29) *"For those who believe and work righteousness, is every blessedness, and a beautiful place of (final) return."*
- (24:55) *"Allah Has promised, to those among you who believe and work righteous deeds, that He Will, of a surety, grant them in the land, inheritance (of power), as He granted it to those before them; that He Will establish in authority their religion - the one which He has chosen for them; and that He will change (Their state), after the fear in which they (lived), to one of security and peace: 'They will worship Me (alone) and not associate aught with Me.' If any do reject faith after this, they are rebellious and wicked."*

2. Who is God in Islam

- God is unseen.
 - We know God through His names and attributes given to us in the Qur'an.
 - No god but God. (Notice l.c. "g" and u.c. "G")
- (59:22) *"Allah is He, than Whom there is no other god".*
- God has no gender; it is the limitations of the language that forces us to use He, His, and Him when referring to God.
 - God is Unique, nothing is like Him.
- (42:11) *"there is nothing whatever like unto Him, and He is the One that hears and sees (all things)".*
- Some of Allah's attributes are summarized in the following verses.
- (59:22) *"Allah is He, than Whom there is no other god- who knows (all things) both secret and open; He, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Allah is He, than Whom there is no other god- the Sovereign, the Holy One, the Source of Peace (and perfection), the Guardian of Faith, the Preserver of Safety, the Exalted in Might, the Irresistible, the Supreme: Glory to Allah! (High is He) Above the partners they attribute to Him. He is Allah, the Creator, the Evolver, the Bestower of forms (or color). To Him belong the Most Beautiful names: Whatever is in the heavens and on earth, doth declare His Praises and Glory; and He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise.*
- In another verse, two more magnificent attributes of Allah are revealed : Al-Gha'foor and Al-Wa'dood.

² The Qur'an reveals (59:22) that *"Allah is He, than Whom there is no other god."* Allah is God's Name and is not an Arabic translation for God. The Hebrew words used for God in the Bible are Elohim, Elah, and Alah. The Greek ones are Eloi and Eli.

(85:14) *"And He is the Oft-Forgiving, Full of loving-kindness"*

- There are 99 such Attributes for Allah that were revealed in the Qur'an.
- The Islamic teachings emphasizes the Balance in God's Attributes. The Balance between His Magnificent Powers and Might on one hand and His Compassion, Mercy, Love, and Forgiveness on the other.
- He Punishes and He Forgives
- He Gives and He Takes
- He Starts and He Ends
- He Allows and He Prevents
- He Glorifies and He Belittles
- He Champions and He Defeats
- He Revenges yet He is Patient
- He is Just
- He is All-Knowing
- He Does it all in Balance and in Wisdom. A Balance beyond our appreciation, and a Wisdom beyond our comprehension.
- He is the only to be praised in health and in sickness, in richness and in poverty, and in times of ease and in times of hardship.
- In Islam the use of the familiar term "In'sha'Allah" (God Willing) for an event to take place, means that the event will take place Should Allah Wills it, and - at the same time - implies that Allah Will Prevent it from happening if Allah so Wills.

3. The Relationship between God and Humans.

- All Allah's creations are in the state of submission to Him.
 - They function and behave according to His rules and regulations.
 - Plants and animals, the sun and the moon, the clouds and the winds, every single atom and every single part of the atom, all function according to His Plan and His Will. All are in a state of submission (Islam) to the Will of Allah.
 - To Allah, there is no such thing as random, it is all determined; predetermined to be more accurate. And He is the only One in full Knowledge and in full Control.
- The Human, as an organism, is also subject to the rules of Allah:
 - our bodies function according to set rules and regulations. Our bodies are in a state of total submission (Islam) to the Will of Allah.
- The difference between humans and other creations, however, is that we were given the will and the ability to choose.
- The human being (in Arabic is "Insan," often mistranslated as Man even in available Qur'anic meaning translations), because of his free will, carries the responsibility which is defined in the Holy Qur'an as the Arabic word "AMANA" (trust).

(33:72) *"We did indeed offer the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains; but they refused to undertake it, being afraid thereof: but the human undertook it - he was indeed unjust and ignorant (or foolish)."*

- When the human mind submits to Allah, then this human has complete submission to Allah. Such human is to be referred to as Muslim.
- At this level of total and complete submission, the relationship between Allah and the human is a complete acceptance, peace, obedience, and satisfaction to Allah.

(98:7-8) *"Those who have faith and do righteous deeds - they are the best of creatures. Their reward is with Allah: gardens of eternity, beneath which rivers will flow; they will dwell therein forever; Allah well pleased with them and they are well pleased with Him: All this for such as fear their Lord and Cherisher.*

- In Islam, salvation is earned through belief and righteous deeds.
- It takes both to establish healthy individuals and healthy societies.
- Islam, as a way of life, is concerned with the establishment of healthy individuals and healthy societies.
- Belief alone is not sufficient, it must be practiced. Practicing the belief by doing righteous deeds maintains that belief and nourishes it.
- Righteous deeds (or good work) for the wrong cause can only lead to evil.
- It is only for the right reasons and for the right belief that righteous deeds can have meaning and can produce results.
- If one does not use his belief to do righteous deeds for himself and for his society, one would be worthless.
- Both faith and righteous deeds combined form the basis for a true and total submission to Allah.
- Part of the submission is complete reliance on Him.
 - in matters of needs and support.
 - . God is the only one who provides.
 - . God is the only one who can take.
 - . God is the only one who balances and controls everything and every action.
 - . A Muslim accepts, with content, whatever comes from Allah. It is an acceptance based on the strong belief and trust in God's Wisdom.
 - . This acceptance is not a passive one. It is complemented by his continuous strive for the betterment of his conditions.
 - . Muslims also understand that God does not change one's hardship conditions unless and until one seeks that change and works for it.
- Part of the acceptance is obedience without challenging God's Will, Judgment, or Commands.
- Obedience means believing in Allah's messages and is manifested in practicing the commands of these messages.
- A Muslim, even if he or she does not comprehend Allah's commands or causes, he or she accepts, and willingly obeys Allah's commands and causes.
- The relationship between Humans and Allah, in Islam, is a direct one, with no mediators.
 - Muslims worship Allah directly.
 - Muslims supplicate and pray to Allah directly.
 - Muslims do righteous deeds for the sake of Allah directly.
 - Muslims repent to Allah directly.
 - . A sinner can always repent by simply: stopping the sin, paying the consequences (e.g. a thief returns what was stolen), regretting his actions, and promising Allah, in his heart, a sincere repentance.
- In this direct relationship between the human and Allah, the human recognizes that there is no other party which can help, give, take, support, provide, or grant repentance but Allah.
- In such direct relationship between the human and Allah, the human does not associate any other beings with Allah.

- Through such direct relationship between the human and Allah, the human's faith and submission to Allah becomes complete and pure.
- To enhance and maintain this relationship Islam prescribes various forms of worships (Ibadat).
- Worships in Islam are also to serve the needs of the humans both physically and spiritually in a balanced yet integrated manner.
- Worships in Islam are for profit and enjoyment in a balanced yet integrated manner.
- Worships in Islam take two main forms: righteous deeds, as well as ritualistic worships.
- Righteous deed worships include all beneficial actions with sincere intentions a Muslim commits in the way of Allah.
 - Eating is a form of worship when it is done with the intention of taking care of one's body, as Allah commands. Eating is a profit to the body and is a joy to the soul. It is a worship.
 - Engaging in sports is a form of worship when it is done with the intention of maintaining and improving one's health, as Allah commands. Exercising is a profit to the body and is a joy to the soul. It is a worship.
 - Socializing is a form of worship when it is done with the intention of building a healthy society, as Allah commands. Socializing is a profit to the community and is a joy to the soul. It is a worship.
 - Removing a litter from the street is form of worship as is done for beautification, cleanliness and health reasons, as Allah commands. This too is a profit to the environment and is a joy to the soul. It is a worship.
- Righteous deed worships include all actions pertaining to the two essential aspects of the human individual: maintaining and improving the physical being and nourishing and enhancing the spiritual needs.
- Ritualistic worships in Islam include Praying, Alms-giving, Fasting, and Pilgrimage for those able physically as well as financially.
- These worships too are to satisfy spiritual and physical needs. Again they are to profit from, and again they are to enjoy.
 - Prayers in Islam is a communication between the human and his Creator. A meeting in which the human soul submits to and communicates with Allah, at the same time the human body bows and kneels to Allah's Greatness and Might.
 - . It is performed 5 times each day, spaced over the day:
 - . It is a continuous reminding of Allah.
 - . It is a continuous renewal to the commitment to Allah.
 - . It provides a continuous prevention against evil and wrong doing. It is a boot strap of the human to the straight path.
 - . It enforces self discipline, time awareness and time management.
 - . It conveniences community ties and brotherhood as congregational prayers are encouraged and better rewarded in Islam. Rich and poor stand next to each other, shoulder to shoulder, and bow and kneel together to the same god.
 - It also provides physical benefits:
 - . It enforces a code for body cleanliness and personal hygiene, as Muslims clean up and wash (ablution) for prayers.
 - . It contains a form of exercising the body.
 - . It provides mechanisms for releasing tension and stress.
 - Other ritualistic worships also provide spiritual and physical benefits.

- It is from this perspective that one can see that Islam is a way of life. It honors and respects both sides of the human; and it works for the sake of satisfying these two aspects.
- A Muslim is to always seek the balance in satisfying both aspects, the spiritual and the physical.
- In other words, a Muslim as he worships, he is working for the life in the hereafter as if he dies tomorrow, and for his current life as if he lives forever.
- It is the sincerity of the worship that gives it its effectiveness and usefulness. Islam teaches us to worship Allah as if we see Him, since if we do not see Him, He Sees us.

4. The Present Status of Islam and Muslims.

- At present, Islam is not applied in its total and proper form in any part of the world.
- It is a well established fact among Muslims that according to Islam, there are no governments that qualify at this time to be called an Islamic government, since non of the so called Islamic governments apply Islam in law and spirit.
- Islam is only applied partially in some parts of the world.
- In most countries and societies, impurities from local cultures and habits are embedded in the practice of Islam.
- It is unfortunate that some Muslims have misused many Islamic concepts including the concept of Jihad and used them to serve their personal gain. Jihad, for example, (properly translated as struggle) is mistranslated in English as Holy war. Jihad is the struggle by righteous Muslims in the way of Allah for the sake of raising Allah's word (promoting Allah's cause). A person who speaks, writes, or physically fights in defense against oppression and evil is doing Jihad. Examples of Jihad include the struggle of the Mujahedeen of Afghanistan and the Mujahedeen of Palestine.
- To understand the Islamic spirit in this regard, we should examine the example of our Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). History teaches us that Muhammad withstood hostility beyond imagination for about 13 years in Mecca, before defending the Muslims in a battle. He never declared hostile or assaulting wars, and he treated the prisoners of war with far more humane magnitude than any thing stated to his time or what is stated by the Geneva Convention in our times.
 - A holy war in Islam can only be declared by the Caliph, (the acknowledged leader of all Muslims worldwide), for one of three acknowledged reasons: 1. in defense against an assault, 2. to free oppressed or religiously persecuted people, or 3. to remove authorities that disallows or prevents people from freedom of expression of their beliefs or freedom of practicing Islam.
- True pictures and practices of Islam are documented in the history of Islam and Muslims for many centuries. During this epoch, justice, freedom, prosperity, peace were the characteristics of the Islamic communities.
- One still can see hints of the profits and benefits of Islam through some current practices in the Muslim communities.
 - In the countries that partially complies with the Islamic Law (Shari'ah), crime rate is at its lowest compared to other countries.
 - Muslim societies still enjoy strong family and society ties which are strong enough that an elderly, an orphan, a disabled, or a needy person does not face starvation, homelessness, or similar forms of suffering.
- Islam is regaining its worthy understanding and appreciation in the hearts and minds of the new Muslim generation.