

A Christian Response to Islam

1 Peter 2:9-25; Matthew 5:43-48

Suggested Reading: *Islam in our Backyard*, Tony Payne
World Religions, John Dickson

Disclaimer: I don't pretend to be an expert on Islam or the Koran!

Rioting in the Streets

We recently saw rioting in the streets of Sydney and overseas over an Internet film disparaging the prophet Mohammed.

Islamic leaders and politicians in other countries seemed to fan the flames and encourage protest and outrage, rather than call for calm. A minister of the Pakistani government offered a \$100,000 bounty to anyone who killed the filmmaker. Salman Rushdie spent 9 years in fear of his life under a pseudonym after he published *The Satanic Verses* and Ayatollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa* against him. And then of course we know about the murder of the people in planes and the twin towers in the 9/11 attacks.

Persecution of Christians by Islamists happens in numerous countries of the world. A recent report from Syria says that amidst the chaos in that country Christians are being targeted by Al Qaida-linked groups, being killed and expelled from their homes. In a recent visit by Archbishop Ben Kwashi from Nigeria we heard of the challenges he and fellow Christians face when churches are targeted with bombings and Christians are killed because of their faith. And of course it was the tenth anniversary just this week of the Bali bombings when 88 Australians were killed in an Islamist attack.

In Australia there are regular calls for the adoption of Sharia law alongside Australian law, in at least property and marriage areas, (where women are not treated equally). In the UN 57 Muslim countries (part of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation) are seeking a global Blasphemy Law, where it would be unlawful across the globe to speak against the prophet Mohammed. In countries where such a law already exists like Pakistan it has been used to persecute religious minorities.

I think we turned some sort of corner in Australian life when we saw the riots in Sydney. A few things that were expressed:

How could an Internet film of a few minutes, although clearly offensive to Muslims, be the cause of **such** a reaction?

How could the whole western world seemingly be blamed for something an individual did?

Some of the people rioting had come to Australia as refugees where they experience the hospitality, standard of living and freedoms that are part of our culture. Their actions and demands seem to go against the hospitality that is offered and go against an "Australian way of life".

How do we respond as *Christians* to these many issues, linked in some way to the Islamic faith?

I don't think I can do justice to the complexities of these issues in this one sermon but I will attempt to sketch a framework for our thinking. I hope its not simplistic but here are a few thoughts.

Recognise the Depth of Feeling of Muslims

To insult the prophet Mohammed causes significant grief to those of the Muslim faith. I don't believe it justifies in any way violence, the deaths of people and the threats made, but we are silly to ignore the hurt it causes, amongst moderate Muslims as well as radicals.

If we are as Christians to argue for the uniqueness of Christ and disagree with the Muslim faith and the way it portrays God, we need to do so truthfully but respectfully, and, in the manner of Jesus, lovingly. We will disagree about the status of the Prophet and the tenets of the Islamic faith, but denigration of anyone's faith is unnecessary.

If we are to engage with Muslims in discussion of faith issues, then it helps if we understand them. Caricature won't help, nor will attributing extreme positions to every Muslim you talk to or see, be any more helpful than others attributing some extreme *Christian* views that are around with what you or I hold to be true about the Christian faith. I suspect most Muslims find violence for these reasons unacceptable, and I must say that the quick reaction from Australian Muslim leaders condemning the violence in Sydney was helpful. And I might add, on the whole, the vast majority of Muslims seek to live peacefully. We should not equate the terms "Muslim" with "terrorist".

When I for one see a woman in a hijab or burka (rare though it is in Adelaide) I hope that they realise we Aussies don't hate them. Many have come from terrible situations including suffering as refugees and while I might not share their faith, I would not want them to feel persecuted or racially vilified in our country. It happens, but Christians should never be part of it. It is not the way of Christ.

A Clash of Views on ...

But there are obviously significant differences between Christianity and Islam.

One way to respond to Islam is to recognise this clash of views and not downplay them. It will help in your engagement in this issue if you understand what Christianity believes and the difference this makes in *your* faith and life compared to what Islam teaches.

1. Human Authorities and Political Structures

My understanding of Islam is that, unlike Christianity, Islam *necessarily* has a *political* dimension. State and church are one in Islam. As someone has said, "it is proper for Islam to rule and not be ruled" and if force can be used to achieve political ends then to many in Islam this is a legitimate way to remove the rule of the "infidel" over them.¹

It does have, and I believe I am right in saying this, a wider agenda that is part of its faith. It seeks, in many instances, the establishment of an Islamic community ruled by Sharia in a country and the imposition of Sharia law as its end goal in a country.

Whereas Christianity *can* conceive of the separation of church and state, Islam, in its goals and aims, cannot.

If in minority, Islam accedes to the majority – in our case democracy (called the "Mecca" model) – but it will seek to change this to its religious system of government if it is in the majority or can achieve control (the "Medina" model).

¹ See Norman Anderson, *The World's Religions*, IVP 1991, p128 "There can be little doubt that it is the Muslim's instinctive feeling that the practice of his religion cannot properly be reconciled with living under the sovereignty of a non-Muslim government ..."

In many countries this has had terrible consequences (think of Nigeria, the division of North and South Sudan), and in countries undergoing change such as Egypt and Libya, with now Islamic leaders, Christians wait anxiously to see if their rights will be taken away and if persecution, already evident, will grow with *official* sanction. We do well to pray for them.

The goal of the Christian faith is for people to come into a relationship with a God of grace who through faith and repentance offers us forgiveness and the gift of eternal life through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's son. It is individual transformation we are seeking, as God works in a person's heart.

This has little in the *first instance* to do with any sort of political system – even democracy by the way. While we might like or prefer our political leaders or leaders of countries to rule in a way that reflects Christian principles and morality (and I do), and where we can we should oppose unjust structures... the New Testament it seems to me, does not argue for a *structure* of government to be one that discriminates *for* Christianity.²

In 1 Peter 2 the advice for Christians living in a society of non-believers (or “pagans”) is firstly to live godly lives themselves – as true examples of the God who has called them out of darkness into his marvelous light (v10) -

11 Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. **12** Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. (NIV®)

Secondly we see that Christians are called to submit to those in authority, as they are responsible for the just application of law. They are called to pray for their leaders who, they hope, will uphold justice.

13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, **14** or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.

17 Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor. (NIV®)

Submitting to and honouring the emperor? He was likely not a great fan of Christians – it was probably Nero (AD 54-68) at the time Peter was writing. Yet Christians are to pray for him and while they have freedom in Christ, they are to not abuse that freedom, but respectfully live as good members of the country God has them in, as a witness to Christ.

They can be good citizens of Russia, China or Australia or Libya or Egypt, praying for their leaders, whether Christian or not, and supporting laws that uphold justice, truth and integrity in dealing with people.

Jesus never calls for the overthrow of governments or a change of leadership, political or religious. In fact, he steadfastly avoids attempts to cast him into the role as an alternative king in this world, rejecting political or military functions. He has come to “proclaim the good news of the kingdom”, a kingdom, as he says to Pontius Pilate, that is “not of this world” (John

² The laws that govern the nation of Israel in the Old Testament are a unique and historically bound one-off.

18:36). Liberation theology and other Christian movements over time have ignored this. We await the final day at the end of the age at his second coming, when Christ's kingdom is seen in a rule unchallenged.

2. On Jesus

About Jesus

We speak of Jesus as the Son of God, incarnate, God-in-the-flesh. We believe he was sinless and his life, miracles, healing and teaching, his death and resurrection, truly reveal God to us.

Islam, while it honours Jesus as a prophet, says God cannot be incarnate. To put humanity and God together is blasphemous. That Mohammed is the last and greatest prophet who supersedes Jesus. Islam says he did not die on a cross.³

3. On access to God (or grace vs works)

Islam means "submission", a Muslim is someone who "submits to the will of Allah".⁴ Keeping the law, upholding the five pillars of Islam⁵ is needed to receive mercy. Islam says that God *may* be merciful and that on the day of judgement if your good deeds outweigh your bad you will go to heaven.

We believe God has shown us mercy and grace through Christ.

1 Peter says 24 "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed." (NIV®)

A major difference is that we can have access to God through his grace, not through any merit of our own. Our good deeds are a response to God's grace and mercy but achieve no merit for salvation. We believe we can be in a right relationship with God by faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus. That his atoning sacrifice on the cross pays the penalty that we deserved.

We believe God is a God of grace whom we can call Father and that through Christ we can be God's sons and daughters. For Islam, while God can be a kind and forgiving master he cannot be "Abba, Father", a uniquely Christian view of God.

4. On Scripture

About Scripture

Islam sees the Koran as God directly dictating his words. Effectively only understood properly in Arabic the Koran is a corrective to the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. While Muslims view the Bible as a "holy" book they believe Christians changed the Bible to suit themselves and their faith.

The Christian view of Scripture is that it is God's inspired word, mediated through writers who reflect their historical contexts when they write. In the Scriptures we see the truth about Christ, the word of God made flesh, who he was and why he came, so that we might have salvation.

³ Surah 4.157

⁴ See *A Spectator's Guide to World Religions*, John Dickson, p202

⁵ Recite the Creed (Kalima) "There is no God but God and Muhammad is his prophet"); prayer – 5 times a day; fasting (Ramadan – 9th month of the Muslim calendar); almsgiving; pilgrimage to Mecca (the Haij).

How Do we Respond to these differences?

Don't be Naïve

In Australia it is right I believe to not be naïve about the reality that change in our country's laws is the goal of *some* Muslims who come here to live. This might influence our immigration policy or the way we communicate what being a part of Australian life means.

We do not want to give up these freedoms, nor the capacity to worship openly, without fear. (Some have even expressed concern that in preaching on this topic I might be opening myself up to danger if I somehow "step over the line".) We should express these concerns in our public forums and to government and not be a silent majority. Speak up!

We also want, as an evangelising faith, for people to be able to change their faith without fear of punishment. In many Muslim countries it is a crime to change your faith. In others, to do so can lead to your death. Freedom of worship includes freedom to believe differently from the faith you were born into.

We should be careful about any attempts to introduce Sharia law in any form.

Know What You Believe

Many in Australian culture will, because they don't have a faith, try to say Christianity and Islam are the same. They are not.

We must know what we believe about Jesus and confidently assert the truths we believe with grace and love.

How can we argue that Jesus is the Son of God?

How can we say we have eternal life through his death and resurrection?

Know your Bible well and be prepared to share what you know. You won't be able to answer everything, but in a genuine dialogue with a Muslim – who in many ways may have a closer integration of faith and life than you do – you can share your confidence in salvation through Christ. These issues may help us to more carefully think through our faith – it *does* matter what you believe!

Respond like Jesus

Jesus loved those whom he came into contact with.

If people have a go at you, don't respond to threats with threats, but follow Jesus' example. 1 Peter 2

22 "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." 23 When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. (NIV®)

Pray for those who persecute you. I was very struck by Archbishop Ben Kwashi's recent visit to Adelaide. He is Archbishop of Jos in Nigeria, where many of his church have been killed for their faith and his own life and that of his family threatened. He has said that he decided from the first day he was threatened to never retaliate – because it would undermine the message of the Gospel. And he gives the same message to his people. Jesus said – "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven." (NIV®)

We are to pray for those who may ridicule or persecute us. Quite a call, but in doing so we are acting like our Saviour.

Live and Share the Gospel

Now, don't forget that Islam is a *missionary* religion, as is Christianity. Both faiths will seek converts. Both will argue their views of God, faith and morality in the marketplace. Both will want their faith to grow across the world.

Many Muslims will not really understand true Christianity, and unfortunately see Christianity and "western" views of the world as identical. For those of us who see – even if they had such origins – how far western countries are now from Christian ways of thinking, this is strange. We don't make that equation at all! It may indeed be that into that vacuum of morality and identity in western counties Islam has found a place to grow, although much of the increase in Islam in Australia is through immigration.

We of course need to both live and proclaim the Gospel. Living peacefully with a holy way of life among people as good disciples of Christ so that our message about him is validated by the way we live. We do not seek *conflict* but *conversion* according to God's work by his Holy Spirit. Pray for the Spirit to be active.

We want all people to understand their need for the cross of Christ and to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Saviour for their salvation – Muslims included.

May the God of grace give us wisdom to do so in a way that proclaims Christ clearly, as we should.

Amen

1 Peter 2:9-25

9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. **10** Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

11 Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. **12** Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, **14** or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. **15** For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. **16** Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. **17** Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.

18 Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. **19** For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. **20** But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is

commendable before God. 21 To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

22 "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."^[e]

23 When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. 24 "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed." 25 For "you were like sheep going astray,"^[f] but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Matt 5:43-48

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor^[g] and hate your enemy.'

44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

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