

Learning from Islam

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One has only to visit a place such as the Gallipoli Mosque at Auburn and receive the welcome and hospitality offered by the Muslim community to all comers to experience the rich contribution that Muslims are making to our Australian society. As Christians, Muslims, and Jews mingle there one is reminded of a past age in the city of Cordoba in Andalucia, Spain, where under Muslim rule Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived together as a shining example of tolerance, justice, compassion and even prosperity until it was brutally brought to an end by short-sighted Christian rulers. Perhaps now, in our own century, in Australia, we have been given another opportunity to recapture some of that earlier vision and reality.

Through contact with many Muslims in daily life and in interfaith relations I have come to appreciate Islam both as a religion and as a way of life. Despite some important areas of difference, Muslims and Christians have much in common with each other, including our shared humanity. Like Christianity, Islam is one of the three great monotheistic faiths of the world. Muslims and Christians worship the same one God (whom Muslims address as “Allah” using the Arabic word for God) who invites all human beings into a relationship of devotion which also must find expression in an ethical way of life. My deepening contact with Islam has given me many new insights into my Christian faith. It has challenged me over some “lost” elements of Christianity. It has brought new appreciation of some “taken-for-granted” aspects of my Christian belief. And it has broadened my perspective, encouraging me to look beyond a “tribal” or sectarian approach (in which the welfare of “my” group—whether ethnic, cultural or religious is paramount) to the “common good” of our society as a whole.

An aspect of Christianity which can be often experienced as “lost” among contemporary Christians is the cultural and religious identity of Jesus Christ as a prophet of Israel. This aspect of Jesus’ identity very soon became overlaid by the Greco-Roman formulas of the Christian Creeds in the early centuries of the Church. Although these Creeds were an important, and necessary, first attempt to translate the meaning of Jesus’ life into the thought patterns of a completely different culture—an effort to produce an inculturated Christianity in the Greco-Roman context—in practice it has meant that the original Middle Eastern cultural milieu of Jesus’ life has subsequently often been underplayed.

This is what Muslims discover and share with us when they read the Gospels. Hesham El-Essawy,¹ an Egyptian Muslim, who was introduced to the Christian Gospels by a Coptic Christian friend, describes his experience of finding Jesus in the Christian scriptures:

“I read the Gospels with great interest. I recall my feelings clearly. I vividly remember jumping out of bed with joy, having discovered that there was not one thing that Jesus said that I, as a Muslim, quarrelled with or even failed to admire.”

He went on to say:

“The Gospels record that Jesus worshipped God with great humility... There is no contradiction between the religion that Jesus preached and Islam. I cried with joy at the discovery. My Islamic belief that Jesus the Messiah was a very great and honourable man,

messenger of God, born miraculously as a sign to the people of Israel, without a father just as Adam was without a father or a mother, son of the great pious daughter of Adam whose virginity was not just that of the flesh, but of the spirit too, was vindicated by the Gospels themselves.”

Although as a Muslim, El-Essawy (whose family name translates as “the follower of Jesus”) does not accept the Christian dogma of the Trinity he was excited to discover in the Gospels that

“Jesus taught his followers in parables. But, simple as it was, it was often above their heads. The Gospels record how the disciples often wondered what Jesus meant. It might come as a surprise to a Christian to realize that Muslims feel completely at home with the teachings of Jesus.”

In his eyes “it is the Christian creed, not the teachings of Jesus that stands between Christians and Muslims.” The Muslim appreciation of Jesus as prophet can alert us to how important it is not to lose the radical nature of the life and teaching of Jesus in the more established institutional forms that have given shape to the Christian community in later centuries.

Muslims, with their practices of ritual prayer and fasting, are also a challenge to Christians who may have “forgotten” these aspects of their own religious tradition. Some of the physical actions that accompany Muslim prayer such as bowing and prostrating were also common among Christians and are still preserved in the prayer of some ancient Christian traditions (e.g. the prayer of Assyrian Christians in Southeast Turkey and the nine ways of prayer of St Dominic).

Perhaps there is a desire today, with a growing awareness of the holistic nature of personal spiritual development, to recover some of these more concrete and physical expressions of faith. Among many, especially younger, Christians for whom these may not have been part of their early upbringing, there seems to be a renewed interest in aids to prayer such as prayer beads, physical movement in prayer and pilgrimage.

The practice of fasting, especially in the Muslim month of Ramadan, is also a spiritual tradition that Christians familiar with the liturgical season of Lent can resonate with. For Muslims as well as Christians, a time of fasting is a way of practicing self-discipline and of renewing oneself spiritually. It is a time when one gives special attention to one’s relationship with God and with others. Muslims take a special interest in reading the Qur’an during the month of Ramadan and break their fast each day at a joyful family evening meal. Perhaps as Christians we have become less prescriptive about what Christian life requires of us. Muslims can alert us to the need to have some structures in our lives which call us to prayer and some regular practices which nurture our spirituality.

In surprising ways contact with Islam has also led me to a new appreciation of the deepest mysteries of my Catholic Christian faith—especially, perhaps most unlikely of all, new insights into Christian belief in the Incarnation and the Trinity. The Islamic witness is first and foremost to a transcendent God, beyond any form of representation or imagery or containment in the material world. From this perspective it is, ultimately, a reminder to us all of the transience and relative insignificance of material things. As a consequence this has encouraged me to reflect more on the meaning of the Christian belief that God, in Jesus, embraced human form and entered fully into the human condition. Jesus’ solidarity with us shows that God takes the world and human life seriously. Therefore, in Christianity the

material world, despite its ephemeral nature, is affirmed as the place of our salvation. I see the Christian insight—one of taking seriously the material world and the human condition and all that it entails—as being complementary rather than contradictory to the Islamic one. Both have something important to teach us.

Muslims, of course, are ardent monotheists and, if not properly informed, can be wary of what may seem to them to be a Christian belief in three Gods. Muslims' unwavering belief in the One God points us to the oneness of our humanity and the things that unite us, while Christian belief in the Trinity acknowledges that diversity can be integral to unity. It has the potential to lead us to the deeper insight that one of the ways that God's unity finds expression is in and through the distinctiveness and otherness of persons in mutual relationship. Again it seems Christians and Muslims have something significant to share with each other.

The way that many people today have come to learn about Islam and Muslims has been through media reports covering the activities of extremist Muslim groups in various parts of the world. But, to draw a Christian parallel, this would be like the people around the world having their knowledge of Christians and Christian belief limited to media reports about the activities of the Irish Republican Army or the Ulster Volunteer Force. The picture of Islam we are getting does not do justice to a long, rich, and deep religious tradition which, historically, has contributed much to world culture. The religious tradition of Islam continues to enrich and sustain in productive ways the vast majority of Muslims in the world as they go about the ordinary tasks of their daily lives, including those who are making their own unique contribution towards building a tolerant and compassionate Australian society. We Christians who, together with Muslims, share Abraham and Sarah as our common ancestors in faith, have much to gain by being open to learn from the spiritual and cultural heritage brought to us by our Islamic sisters and brothers.

Note

1. "An Islamic view of Spirituality" in *The Way Supplement*, no 78, 1993.

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