

What Islam Teaches About Ethics and Justice

The Editors of *U.S. Catholic* interview Riffat Hassan

Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in North America. Why has it gained more than 1 billion followers around the world?

“Islam has a very powerful emphasis on justice in the context of the family and society,” says Islamic scholar Riffat Hassan. “There are more laws in the Qur’an about how to organize a just home than on any other subject.... The idea is that if you can have justice within the home, you can have justice in the world.”

Hassan has written and lectured extensively on issues concerning the Muslim world, particularly those related to women and Islam. She is a Professor of Religious Studies and a feminist theologian at the University of Louisville in Louisville, Kentucky.

What are the origins of Islam?

When we look at the religions of the world, we sometimes divide them into groups or families, and Islam belongs to what is often described as the Abrahamic or Semitic faiths. Islam is the youngest of the three Semitic religions (following Judaism and Christianity). It is also the last of the world’s five major religions (including Hinduism and Buddhism). Islam is believed to have about 1.5 billion followers in the world, and there are over 50 Muslim countries. It is also the fastest growing religion in North America.

The Islamic calendar begins in the year 622 A.D. when the first Islamic society was established in the city of Medina in Arabia.

Just as the early Christians asserted that theirs was not a new religion - that they were the successors and heirs to Israel - likewise, the Qur’an, which Muslims regard as sacred, states repeatedly that Muslims must believe in all the previous prophets and scriptures.

Where does Muhammad come in?

At the time of the birth of Muhammad, Arabia was a tribal society. Over 95 percent of the people were nomadic peoples called Bedouins, who lived in the desert. Mecca was a major trading city, ruled by the Quraysh tribe, and Muhammad’s grandfather was the patriarch of this city.

Muhammad's father died before he was born and his mother died when he was six years old. He was raised by his grandfather and uncle.

Between the ages of 25 and 40, before he received the call to prophethood, Muhammad spent a lot of time in solitude. One of his favorite places was a cave called Hira outside of Mecca. We don't have any records of what happened there, but Muhammad was troubled about what was happening in Arabia, which was changing from a nomadic, tribal society to an urban, mercantile society in which the strong bonds which existed within the group were being replaced by the vested interests of the elite. The other problem was the growing number of slaves.

Then one day while at the cave of Hira, when Muhammad was 40 years old, he saw a figure in the distance and heard a voice saying, "*Iqra'*" which means "Read" or "Recite." Muhammad's first thought was that he was being possessed by a spirit, so he didn't respond. He heard the same command again and didn't respond. But when he heard it a third time, he felt compelled to recite what he heard. This is the beginning of the Qur'anic Revelation, starting with a verse that says, "Read in the name of God who has created human beings out of a germ-cell. Read - for thy God is the Most Bountiful One who has taught humanity the use of the pen - taught humankind what it did not know!" (Surah 95: *Al-'Alaq*: 1-5)

Deeply disturbed by this experience, Muhammad narrated it to his wife Khadijah who reassured him that nothing bad could happen to him since he was an honest man. However, she took him to her cousin Waraqah who was a well-known Christian scholar. Muhammad told Waraqah about his experience and Waraqah said, "You should not be afraid; this is a message from God."

This process of revelation continued for about 22 years, until shortly before Muhammad's death. These revelations were written down and are collectively known as the Qur'an, which means "recitations."

What influence did Judaism and Christianity have on Islam?

Certainly Muhammad knew the Arabian forms of Judaism and Christianity because there were Jews and Christians in that society. But for a long time the Western trend was to represent Islam as a false religion and Muhammad as a false prophet. Orientalists (a generic term for scholars specializing in Islamic Studies) developed the theory of origins, which posited that Muhammad wrote the Qur'an. (The orthodox Muslim belief is that Muhammad received the Qur'an through Archangel Gabriel, just as Moses received the Ten Commandments).

To support their contention, the Orientalist scholars had to explain how Muhammad could have written the Qur'an because he was not a formally literate person. They did so by stating Muhammad acquired knowledge of what is in the Qur'an while traveling. The problems with this approach stem from the differences in the way Muslims, Christians, and Jews regard revelation.

To Jews and Christians, the Bible is a book with multiple authors who are believed to have been divinely- inspired. The Muslim concept of revelation is that the Qur'an has no human component whatsoever and is God's Word which was communicated to Muhammad by the Archangel Gabriel and then transmitted by him as he heard it.

What role does Jesus play in Islam?

Jesus is not worshipped but the Qur'an has the highest terms of respect for him. It calls Jesus the "Word of God" and the "Spirit of God." The Qur'an mentions many prophets, but it does not create a hierarchy; it says all prophets are worthy of respect. It does not say Muhammad is the greatest of the prophets. Muslims simply believe that he's the last of the prophets.

Why has there been so much conflict between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity?

Islam and Judaism are theologically very close - much closer to each other than either is to Christianity - because the idea of God and prophethood is central to both traditions. Another fundamental similarity between Islam and Judaism is the emphasis on ethics.

It is sometimes stated that Muslims and Jews do ethics, while Christians do theology. This means that the primary concern in Christianity has been with what is true and false, whereas in Judaism and Islam it has been with what is right and wrong.

One major cause of problems between Muslims and Jews goes back to the time when Medina was primarily a Jewish city. There were five tribes living in Medina, three of them Jewish and two Arab. The two Arab tribes had lost everything to the Jews.

Muhammad went to Medina in 622 A.D. and organized the Arabs who had converted to Islam. Within a very short period of time, a social transformation started to happen, and eventually the Muslims took over the city.

Between the years 624 A.D. and 627 A.D. the Muslims were attacked three times by the Meccans. All the tribes living in Medina, including the Jews, had signed a treaty called "The Constitution of Medina" according to which if the city of Medina were attacked it had to be jointly defended. However, the Jewish tribes did not do so - in fact, they supported the Meccans in each of the three wars which they launched against the Muslims. This created much bitterness amongst Muslims who wanted that the Jews be punished severely for what they deemed to be an act of treason. However, Muhammad gave the lightest punishment to the Jewish tribes involved in aiding the Meccans in the first two wars - sending them outside the city limits. In the third war the Muslims who were vastly outnumbered by the Meccans faced a highly dangerous situation and became very incensed when the one remaining Jewish tribe in Medina continued to aid the Meccans.

After this war, the Muslims wanted Muhammad to punish the Jewish tribe for treason. He refused to do that and the Muslims chose another judge who ordered that the men be killed and the others be placed in captivity. Muslim and Jewish historians, of course, have different versions of the events that took place between Muslims and Jews in this time-period, but whatever interpretation one accepts, one thing is clear. These events have cast deep and long shadows on Muslim-Jewish relations.

Another reason for Muslim-Jewish conflict is the way Qur'anic references to Jews have been popularly understood. A significant portion of the Qur'an refers to Jews. For instance, it says, "You Children of Israel, God showed you special favors and liberated you out of Egypt, and you have been unfaithful." Sometimes it chastises them for being forgetful or ungrateful. But the Qur'anic text does not repudiate God's relationship with the Jewish people. My reading of it is that God is very concerned about the Children of Israel and continues to give them guidance. Many Muslims, like Christians, have focused on the negative statements about Jews.

In recent times the political question of the State of Palestine has generated a lot of antagonism and hostility between Jews and Muslims. But, through much of their history, Muslims and Jews have actually lived very well together, and Jews have often preferred Muslim to Christian rule.

What about the problems between Islam and Christianity?

One problem is a theological difference: Muslims do not accept Jesus as divine, but as I pointed out, Jesus is highly respected by Muslims. The real problem between Islam and Christianity is not a clash of religions but a clash of empires. The clash began when the Arabs who had been Bedouins unknown in history, created an empire stretching from Spain to India less than 100 years after they became Muslims.

Does that explain the hostility against Muslims today?

Since the seventh century when Islam appeared in the West and was seen as the "Adversary" and "Divider" of the world of Christendom, animosity toward Islam and Muslims appears to have become the collective unconscious of Western psyche. When any kind of a crisis occurs - such as the 1973 oil crisis; the Iranian revolution; the very unfortunate, long, drawn-out hostage crisis, the Salman Rushdie crisis, the Gulf War - there is an immediate reaction against Muslims.

At the time of the World Trade Center bombing, all the headlines read, "Muslim Caught in Bombing." What if he had been a Christian? What if he had been a Jew? Would the headlines have read, "Christian (or Jew) Caught in Trade Center Bombing?" Certainly not. There is little effort made in this country; even at major educational institutions, to understand Islam and to give it the same respect as the other major religions.

But certainly some Islamic leaders have promoted terrorism and hatred for the West.

Yes. But there are historical reasons that underlie the anti-Western attitude of a number of Muslim leaders, countries, and peoples. Virtually all of the Islamic world became colonized by the West. This was a very harsh experience for Muslims.

By 1950, most of the Muslim world became free of colonialism, but the colonial powers, when leaving, left their collaborators in charge. So that in Iran you had the Shah whom many Iranians saw as a Hitler. And look at many other countries in the Islamic world: The oil-rich Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are ruled by a single family. I come from Pakistan which is ruled by 22 families. In these countries a few people have all the money and power. Most of the rulers are the creation of colonizers.

The Muslim world has the fastest growing population in the world. The majority of this population is under the age of 25. It is born into societies where there's a total stranglehold in terms of power. This means that for the majority of young Muslim there are almost no possibilities for getting a decent education or a decent job. There appear to be only two options which are open to them. The first is that they get into the drug and gun-running culture. This culture has done great harm in the last two decades in Lebanon (especially Beirut which was considered a sort of paradise of the Middle East) and in Pakistan.

The other option is that these young people follow the religious extremists (sometimes called "Revivalists.") These extremists have a very narrow understanding of Islam and are bigoted and intolerant. However, they appear to show some concern for the plight of young people.

Americans are concerned that there is so much anti-Western, particularly anti-American, rhetoric in Muslim countries. However, it is a fact that as an American, you can walk the streets of most Muslim countries quite safely. It's not that Muslims in general are against the individual American; it is simply that they resent the policy of the American interests supporting the dictators in their own country. This can lead to a revolution like the one in Iran, where despite strong U.S. support, the Shah was thrown out.

What is a Shi'a, or Shi'ite?

When Muhammad died, his only surviving child was a daughter who also died very shortly thereafter. Muhammad's nearest male heir was his son-in-law and cousin, 'Ali. The Arabs did not have any traditional kingship and elected their leaders. So after the death of Muhammad, his followers got together and elected his oldest friend, Abu Bakr, as the first Caliph. This caused some political tension because a group of Muslims known as the *Shi'an-e-'Ali* (the party of 'Ali) believed that Muhammad should have been succeeded by 'Ali, who was his next-of-kin, male relative.

The fifth Caliph, Amir Muawiyah, who was very secular in his orientation, appointed his son Yazid to succeed him. Yazid had a very bad reputation and many Shi'as started to appeal to Hussain, grandson of the Prophet, saying it was his moral duty to help them against Yazid who was not fit to be the Caliph.

Hussain left Medina with an unarmed band of 100 people, including 73 members of his own family. Ten miles before they got to Kufa they were met by Yazid's soldiers, and the family was massacred. While all this was going on, the people in Kufa, who had invited Hussain, did absolutely nothing to help him. This event is comparable to the Passion event in Christian history, because it was such a massive tragedy and induced a lot of guilt. After this great tragedy which took place at Karbala (680), the Shi'a case became very strong because it symbolized the struggle against oppression of unarmed innocent people (particularly as they belonged to the family of the Prophet).

There is great fear in the West, particularly in the U.S., about the Shi'as. I think it is connected mainly to the Iranian revolution and what is called "Islamic fundamentalism." Take the Gulf War: George Bush had an obsession with Saddam Hussein. He kept saying throughout the war that Hussein was like Hitler and should be overthrown. After the Gulf War ended, Bush started sending messages to "the valiant people of Iraq" to rebel against Hussein. To his surprise, the first people who responded to his call were the Shi'as of south Iraq who actually started to rebel. Such was the American fear of Shi'as, that overnight the message sent by Bush changed. He no longer referred to Saddam Hussein as Hitler because now the counter to Hussein were the "Islamic fundamentalists" of south Iraq.

What is the Shi'a cause?

Shi'a Muslims have always considered themselves a minority that is standing up for justice against great odds. Although the Shi'as are not more than 20 percent of the Muslim population, their actual influence is much greater than that. Iran is, of course, an almost entirely Shi'a country.

The Islamic world is in the grip of so much authoritarianism and oppression that the emphasis in Shi'a Islam on the struggle for justice has both power and relevance. The idea that Shi'as are terrorists is unwarranted. The martyrdom of Imam Hussain gives young Shi'as the motivation to struggle for justice, even to the point of death.

Do you see this as a temporary phenomenon?

It all depends on what we do in the next few decades. Are we going to build bridges or not? I think we are building walls. You can only diffuse the power of terrorist organizations, no matter what they are, by building a broad dialogue and working toward the establishment of justice. If you don't do this, there's no way to stop these people.

What do you see as the role of the West?

I think that the role of the West is to take the initiative in a number of ways. In an encounter between two groups of people, it is very unlikely that the group which is at the bottom is going to feel empowered to enter into a dialogue. The fact that the West is dominant economically, politically, and militarily means that being a superpower also imposes certain moral responsibilities.

Why is Islam growing so rapidly today?

Islam has a very powerful emphasis on social justice, which meant the liberation of the slaves and other disadvantaged people. That is one reason why Islam has spread among so many Afro-Americans. It is interesting to note that in the 60's, when Eastern religions first became popular in this country, the rich people became Zen Buddhists while the poor people became Muslims.

What does Islam say about women?

Just as Jesus had a very positive attitude toward women, breaking a lot of customs and taboos, Muhammad was also very supportive of women. For instance, he insisted that women be allowed to come to the mosque, even if they brought their children with them, and the Arabs hated that.

Islam gave women all the fundamental human rights including the right of inheritance and education in a society where female infanticide was a common practice and women had virtually no rights. However, there is a big gap between normative Islamic teachings and Muslim practices with regards to women.

The average Muslim woman has three characteristics: she is poor, illiterate, and lives in a village. There are over 500 million Muslim women in the world, many of whom share these characteristics. How do you give these women a sense of meaning in their lives when they have always been taught that according to Islam their life has no purpose except to serve men and have a large number of children?

Our best hope is to work with grassroots women's organizations that have an honest commitment to work toward the empowerment of women.

Aren't you in danger when you speak to these women?

Well, I have got one or two very strong advantages. One is, I'm a woman, so nobody takes me very seriously! The other is, I don't live in a Muslim country, so I'm not in the limelight that much. When I go to Pakistan, I work carefully. I don't seek out people who I know are going to throw stones at me. One thing that makes it possible for me to talk to women is the fact that my work is grounded in the Qur'an, and Muslims have great

respect for the Qur'an. Muslim men may disagree with me, but as long as I'm talking on the basis of the Qur'an, I have a chance of being heard.

What is the message of the Qur'an for us today?

There are more laws in the Qur'an about how to organize a just home than on any other subject. The Qur'an doesn't tell you how to organize a state or how to organize the world, but it specifies the basic rights of men, women, children, even servants or slaves in a household. The idea is that if you can have justice within the home, you can have justice in the world. And justice prevails when every person has an equal opportunity for self-development.

The essential message of Islam, which is also that of other prophetic traditions, is that we are called upon to transform the world and to create a just moral and social order. This is a message on which all people of faith can unite regardless of theological and other differences.

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