

An Outline Review

of

Huston Smith's

The World's Religions

(Our Great Wisdom Traditions)

Chapter VI. Islam

Named after the attribute it seeks to cultivate, life's total surrender to God

Part One: Background.

If asked how their religion came into being, the Muslims' answer is Islam begins not with Muhammad in the sixth-century Arabia, but with God. "In the beginning God" the book of Genesis tells us. The Koran agrees.

Like the Jews, the Arabs consider themselves a Semitic people. The descendants of Shem led to Abraham. Abraham married Sarah. Sarah had no son, so Abraham, wanting to continue his line, took Hagar for his second wife. Hagar bore him a son, Ishmael, whereupon Sarah conceived and likewise had a son, named Isaac.

Here we come to the first divergence between the koranic and biblical accounts. According to the Koran, Ishmael went to the place where Mecca was to rise. His descendents, flourishing in Arabia, become Muslims; whereas those of Isaac, who remained in Palestine, were Hebrews and became Jews.

Part Two: The Religion

A. The Seal of the Prophets. - Muhammad

Following Ismael's line in Arabia, we come in the latter half of the sixth century A.D. to Muhammad, the prophet through whom Islam reached its definitive form.

Muslims believe there had been authentic prophets of God before him, but he was their culmination; hence he is called "The Seal of the Prophets." No valid prophets will follow him.

He was born approximately A.D. 570.

Peering into the mysteries of good and evil, " great fiery heart, seething, simmering like a great furnace of thought," was reaching out for God.

The desert jinn were irrelevant to this quest, but one deity was not. Named Allah, He was what his name literally claimed: He was the God, One and only, One without rival.

Around 610, this prophet received his commission. It was the same command that had fallen earlier on Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, and Jesus. There came to him an angel in the form of a man. The angel said to his: "Proclaim!"

Muhammad's life was no more his own. From that time forth it was given to God and to humanity, preaching with unswerving purpose in face of relentless persecution, insult, and outrage, the words that God was to transmit for twenty-three years. These words became the Koran.

Muhammad claimed only one miracle, that of the Koran itself. (The content of the revelation, the Koran will be describe in

section C, below.)

At first he made few converts, by the end of a decade, only several hundred families were acclaiming him as God's authentic spokesman.

B. The Migration That Led to Victory.

Muhammad was suddenly waited on by a delegation of the leading citizens of Yathrib, a city 280 miles to Mecca's north. They wished him to move his ministry to their city.

Muhammad received a sign from God to accept the charge. The year was 622. The migration, known in Arabic as the *Hijra*, is regarded by Muslims as the turning point in world history. Yathrib soon came to be known as Medina, "the city."

Muhammad died in A.D. 632 with virtually all of Arabia under his control and laid the basis of an empire that was soon to embrace within its far-flung boundaries the fairest provinces of the then civilized world.

C. The Standing Miracle. - the Koran

The blend of admiration, respect, and affection that the Muslim feels for Muhammad is an impressive fact of history. Even so, they never mistake him for the earthly center of their faith. That place is reserved for the bible of Islam, the Koran.

So great was Muhammad's regard for its contents that he considered it the only major miracle God worked through him - God's "standing miracle," as he called it.

The words of the Koran came to Muhammad in manageable segments over twenty-three years through voices that seemed at first to vary and sometimes sounded like "reverberating

bells," but which gradually condensed into a single voice that identified itself as Gabriel's.

The Koran continues the Old and New Testament, God's earlier revelations, and presents itself as their culmination: "We made a covenant of old with the Children of Israel (and you have nothing of guidance until you observe the Torah and the Gospel". This entitles Jews and Christians to be included with Muslims as "People of the Book."

However the Koran claims final and infallible revelation of God's will. "This is the Scripture whereof there is no doubt."

In the Koran God speaks in the first person. Allah describes himself and makes known his laws. The Muslim is therefore inclined to consider each individual sentence of the Holy Book as a separate revelation and to experience of the words themselves, even their sounds, as a means of grace. "It is not about the truth; it is the truth."

By contrast the Jewish and Christian Bibles seem more distant from God for placing religious meaning in reports of events instead of God's direct pronouncements.

D. Teachings of the Koran

1. Basic Theological Concepts.- the basic theological concepts of Islam are virtually identical with those of Judaism and Christianity, its forerunners. The four that are most important are:

a. God

The Koran's innovation was to remove idols from the religious scene and focus the divine in a single

God for everyone. Judaism removed idols but its teachings were confined to the people of Israel. Christians, for their part, compromised their monotheism by deifying Christ.

The Koran depicts God's nature as awesome, of infinite power, of great mercy.

b. Creation

The world is presented as created by a deliberate act of Allah's will; as the handiwork of a perfect God, the material world must likewise be good.

c. The Human Self - Foremost among God's creations

As koranically defined, this creation is soundly constituted. The closest Islam comes to the Christian doctrine of original sin is in its concept of *ghaflah*, or forgetting. People do forget their divine origin, and this mistake needs repeatedly to be corrected.

With life acknowledged as a gift from its Creator comes two obligations:

Gratitude for the life that has been received

Surrender or commitment in which nothing is withheld from the Divine

Two more features of the human self are:

Its individuality - its uniqueness and the responsibility that devolves on it alone; never is its distinctness more acutely sensed than on the Day of Judgment.

The issue of the soul's freedom - Whoever gets to himself a sin, gets it solely on his own responsibility.

d. The Day of Judgment

It is the tearing away of all illusions of security that characterizes the doctrine of the Last Judgment and its anticipation in the Koran. Depending on how it fares in its Reckoning, the soul will repair to either the heavens or the hells.

God, Creation, the Human Self, and the Day of Judgment - these are the chief theological pegs on which the Koran's teachings hang. In spite of their importance, however, the Koran is "a book which emphasizes deed rather than idea". The next two sections turn to these deeds.

2. The Five Pillars.- The principles that regulate the private life of Muslims in their dealings with God.

a. Islam's creed, or confession of faith known as the *Shahadah*. "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Prophet."

b. The canonical prayer, in which the Koran adjures the faithful to "be constant".

Muslims are admonished to be constant in prayer to keep their lives in perspective. There are five stipulated prayer times: on arising, when the sun reaches its zenith, its mid-decline, sunset, and before retiring.

As for prayer's content, its standard themes are praise, gratitude, and supplication.

c. The third pillar of Islam is charity. Those who have much should help lift the burden of those who are less fortunate.

d. The fourth pillar of Islam is the observance of Ramadan, a month of fasting.

e. Islam's fifth pillar is pilgrimage. Once during his or her lifetime every Muslim who is physically and economically in a position to do so is expected to journey to Mecca, where God's climactic revelation was first disclosed.

The Five Pillars of Islam consist of things Muslims do to keep the house of Islam erect. There are also things they should not do. Gambling, thieving, lying, eating pork, drinking intoxicants, and being sexually promiscuous are some of these.

3. Social Teachings.

Before Muhammad there was virtually no restraint on internal violence. Glaring inequities in wealth and possession were accepted as the natural order of things. Women were regarded more as possessions than as human beings. Drunkenness and large-scale gambling was widespread. Thanks to Islamic law, within a half-century there was effected a remarkable change in the moral climate on all of these counts.

Islamic law is of enormous scope. Its provisions are here summarized in four areas of collective life:

a. Economics

Society's health requires that material goods be widely and appropriately distributed. These are the basic principles of Islamic economics. It simply insists that acquisitiveness and competition be balanced by fair play and by compassion for the poor.

b. The Status of Women - The koranic reforms improved woman's status incalculably.

c. Race Relations - Islam stresses racial equality and has achieved a remarkable degree of interracial coexistence.

d. The Use of Force

Far from requiring the Muslim to turn himself into a doormat for the ruthless, the Koran allows punishment of wonton wrongdoers to the full extent of the injury they impart. The Koran does not counsel turning the other cheek, or pacifism.

Muhammad incorporated into his charter for Medina the principle of religious toleration. Islam's record on the use of force is no darker than that of Christianity.

Muslims deny that the blots in their record should be charged against their religion whose presiding ideal they affirm in their standard greeting, *as-salami 'alaykum* ("Peace be upon you").

Part Three: Sufism.

Islam is not monolithic, like every religious tradition it divides. Its

main historical division is between the mainstream Sunnis and the Shi'ites which turns on an in-house dispute. Here we take up instead a division that has universal overtones. It is the vertical division between the mystics of Islam, called Sufis and the remaining majority of the faith, who are equally good Muslims but are not mystics.

It stands to reason that not many Muslims will have the time, or the inclination, to do more than keep up with the Divine Law that orders their lives. Their fidelity is not in vain; in the end their reward will be as great as the Sufis'. But the Sufis were impatient for their reward, if we may put the matter thus. They wanted to encounter God directly in this very lifetime. Now.

This called for special methods. They developed three overlapping but distinguishing routes, the mysticisms of love, of ecstasy, and of intuition.

A. The mysticism of love - Sufi love poetry is world famous. Persian poets in particular dwelt on the pangs of separation to deepen their love of God and thereby draw close to him.

B. The mysticism of ecstasy

The approach to the divine presence that turns on experiences that differ, not just in degree but in kind, from usual ones

The content of what ecstatic Sufis experience engrosses them so completely that their states become trancelike because of their total abstraction from self.

Deliberate inducement of such states required practice.

C. The mysticism of intuition

Love mysticism yields "heart knowledge", and ecstasy "visual

or visionary knowledge" because extraterrestrial realities are seen.

Intuitive mysticism brings "mental knowledge" obtained through an organ of discernment called "the eye of the heart."

To the eye of the heart, the world is God-in-disguise, God veiled.

The principal method the Sufis employed for penetrating the disguise is symbolism. In using visible objects to speak of invisible things, symbolism is the language of religion generally; it is to religion what numbers are to science.

Symbolism, though powerful, works somewhat abstractly, so the Sufis supplement it with *dhikr* (to remember), the practice of remembering Allah through repeating his Name.

On the whole, esoterism and exoterism have achieved a healthy balance in Islam.

Part Four: Whither Islam?

For long periods since Muhammad called his people to God's oneness, Muslims have wandered from the spirit of the Prophet.

But having thrown off the colonial yoke, Islam is stirring with some of the vigor of its former youth.
