

Sat, Dec 8, 2001

## We need accurate picture of Islam

*Much of what Americans are hearing is distorted or incorrect*

By Charles A. Kimball  
GUEST COLUMNIST

The intense media focus on daily developments since Sept. 11 has produced conflicting images of Islam, the world's second largest religion. On the one hand, the hijackers, Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaida network and leaders of the Taliban, clearly reveal a militant interpretation of Islam. On the other hand, many Muslim leaders have declared emphatically that Islam is a religion of peace and that these extremists do not reflect true Islam. President Bush has echoed a similar message repeatedly since the attacks: "We have no quarrel with Islam, which is a good and peaceful religion."

Other images further confuse the picture. A number of columnists and highly visible religious leaders - such as Jerry Falwell and Franklin Graham - have seized the moment to proclaim various messages. Some speak about Islam in generic terms as inherently violent, menacing and evil; some highlight selected passages from the Quran to "prove" a particular point.

The vast majority of Americans still know very little about Islam. It is worse than simple ignorance: Much of what many people think they know is incorrect or distorted. To make sense of conflicting images or various passages in the Quran, it is helpful to know more about basic Islamic teachings about God, revelation and the religious and social requirements for the faithful. A fundamental commitment to accurate understanding is a small, but crucial, step.

In my view, pursuing an accurate understanding of Islam relates to Christian responsibility in relationship to others based on central biblical teachings:

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." (Exodus 20:16); "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18; Mt. 19:19; Galatians 5:14); and, "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (Romans 12:18). How is it possible to avoid bearing false witness against, or to love one's neighbor, or to live together in peace if your fundamental understanding about your neighbor is inaccurate or distorted?

Islamic self-understanding begins with a simple affirmation of faith: "There is no God but God and Mohammed is the messenger of God." Allah, the Arabic word for God, is clearly understood by Muslims as the same God that Jews and Christians worship.

Having spent a substantial portion of my professional life working with mission and service ministries of U.S. and Middle Eastern churches, I believe that there is simply no ambiguity on this point. Fifteen million Arabic-speaking Christians in the Middle East pray to Allah. When my family traveled to Bethlehem during Christmas three years ago, we joined with Palestinian Catholics in the Shepherds' Fields and Palestinian Lutherans in Bethlehem in celebration and prayer to Allah.

While Christians and Muslims are talking about the same God, their respective understandings of revelation differ. Christians affirm that God has revealed God's truths through various means: creation, prophetic figures, sacred texts and, most fully, in the person of Jesus. Muslims, on the other hand, speak primarily of revelation as coming through prophets and messengers (e.g., Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed and others). Mohammed is seen as the messenger through whom the final and complete revelation was conveyed in the Quran.

The claim that Christians and Muslims are not talking about the same God makes as much sense as saying Christians and Jews are not talking about the same God. There are clear differences in understanding -

particularly as God's revelation relates to Jesus - but all three religions are linked to a common patriarch: Abraham.

Muslims affirm a radical monotheism. God is the One who creates life and sustains us from moment to moment. Ultimately, according to Islamic teachings about the end times, all humans will stand before God on the Day of Judgment.

A striking image of God's closeness is found in the Quran: "God is closer to you than your jugular vein" (50: 16). According to Islam, none of us would live another minute apart from God's sustaining presence in our lives. If one accepts this premise and the idea of a final judgment, then the operative question becomes this: What does God require of me? Through revelation and the exemplary lives of prophets and messengers, Muslims believe that God has given guidance to humankind.

Islam develops a framework for living in response to these teachings. It begins with the ritual-devotional duties known as the Five Pillars of Islam (confession of faith; five daily prayers; fasting during Ramadan; charitable giving; and the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in your life). Larger systems of Islamic law developed in various parts of the Muslim world over time. These systems endeavor to present Islam as a total way of life, one that integrates religion with political, economic and social systems.

Happily, many Jews, Christians and Muslims are increasing efforts to learn more about the others through study programs and personal interactions. Better understanding does not require or imply agreement. It is, however, a vital step toward peaceful coexistence.

This much is clear: Jews, Christians and Muslims together make up almost half of the world's population. The ways in which these children of Abraham seek to understand one another and interact during the 21st century will have profound consequences for all three religions - and for the world.

- Kimball is the chairman of the Department of Religion at Wake Forest University. A Baptist minister, he served as Middle East Director for the National Council of Churches from 1983 to 1990.

**This story can be found at :** <http://www.journalnow.com/wsj/opinion/MGBHMDYEYUC.html>