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# What Do Theology Students Need to Know About Islam and Why?

by Phyllis Ndoro

## Introduction

A good number of students enrolling in a College or University in Kenya to study Christian theology are surprised to find Islam among their required courses. Some students try to resist while others do not know what to think. In the end they all comply and study the stipulated courses as part of their graduation requirements.

Perhaps one of the biggest impediments to a willing acceptance of Islamic studies by beginning theology students is fear of the unknown. Perhaps some people do not know what Islam is all about and they are somewhat scared to find out for some reason. Sometimes Christians fear being 'evangelized' instead of they themselves being the ones to do the evangelizing. Another big stumbling block comes from believing the normally accepted generalizations, stereotypes and clichés concerning Muslims. A prime example of an inaccurate stereotype that leads to fear is the widely held view that a majority of Muslims are terrorists and are likely to carry out suicide bombings, or that most Muslims are hostile towards Christians and want to wage *jihad* (holy war) against them. But these generalizations *cannot* be applied to *all* Muslims.

It is also important to remember that Muslims have their own generalizations about Christians. For example, the majority of them compare their *jihad* to the medieval Crusades (a "Christian" form of fighting in the name of God). The Crusades from Christianized Europe were attempts to liberate Palestine and the ancient Christian holy places from Muslim control. What does a Muslim hear when he learns that a Christian evangelistic *crusade* is coming to his area? Can he truly disconnect evangelism from conquest? These fears can begin to be addressed when students are made aware of other people's religious history, heroes of the faith, doctrines, and practices.

A course on Islam is meant to introduce the non-Muslim student to an understanding of this other major world religion in Africa. This includes Islam's religious and cultural dimensions, and also its history, especially how Islam came to East Africa. A course on Islam will also discuss the various Islamic sects found in the area, thus helping students understand their sometimes subtle differences. Like Christianity Islam is a missionary religion. Christians need to understand how Muslims propagate their religion, a process known as *da'wa*.<sup>1</sup> Only when Christian students have a good grasp of the different

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<sup>1</sup> See Egdunas Racius, *The Multiple Nature of the Islamic Da'wa*, Academic Dissertation, University of Helsinki, 2004.

aspects of the Islamic faith can they begin to build relationships with their Muslim neighbours. By the time they finish their studies and start working in different parts of the country and the world they should be equipped with that knowledge.

### **What Do Theology Students Need to Know About Islam?**

The definition below captures the different aspects of Islam:

Islam is a religion with a transcendent God, Allah, with stated beliefs and creeds, with various rituals and ceremonies, with a system of law for all of life, and with ethical norms for governing behaviour. Islam includes a personal and devotional side to religion within and beyond the rituals of prayer and pilgrimage. It is a religion of revelation, reason, faith and faithfulness.<sup>2</sup>

#### **1. The History of Islam and Its Prophet**

A university or theological college course on Islam is usually introduced by putting Islam in the context of its origin in Arabia because students often don't realize there was a time even in Arabia that Islam was not present. The course introduces the student to Arabia's pre-Islamic cultural setting where traditional Arabic gods were worshiped. It includes the location of the various traditional religious sites in Arabia. This introduction to the cultural history of the pre-Islamic Arabs helps to set the scene for the life of the prophet of Islam, Muhammad. He was born in 570 AD, and the course covers his life up to the time he received his calling. "Muhammad preached this religion in Arabia between the years AD 610 and 632. He taught the Arabs to believe in one living God, and to live as the servants of God."<sup>3</sup> His entire life is worth studying because he is the main prophet of Islam; he is central in their theology; and he is also included in the Islamic statement of faith. Muslims revere him and try to live like he did – following in his example.

#### **2. Islam's Most Important Holy Places**

There are three cities that are very important to the beliefs and practices of Muslims. *Mecca* is the birthplace of the prophet of Islam and the main place of pilgrimage or the *hajj*. This pilgrimage is required of every able Muslim at least once in his life-time. *Medina*, to the north of Mecca, is where the mosque and the tomb of the prophet of Islam are found. It is important to Muslims because this is where the prophet established a theocratic community. *Jerusalem*, where the Dome of the Rock is found, is where Muslims believe that Muhammad visited heaven during his lifetime and returned to give a description of it to his followers. Tradition also links it to the son of Abraham, Ishmael, an ancestor of the Arabs (Gen.16; 17:20; 25:12-18).

<sup>2</sup> George W. Braswell, *Islam – Its Prophet, People, Politics and Power*, Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> David A. Brown, *A Guide to Religions*, London: SPCK, ISG 12, 2001, p. 182.

### 3. The Holy Writings of Islam

The main holy writings of Islam are the *Qur'an* (or Koran) together with the *Hadith* (traditions – reported speech of the prophet) and the *Sunna* (the way the prophet lived). The Muslims believe that the *Qur'an* is the word of God verbatim. Though the *Qur'an* has been translated into other languages, according to Islam it is impossible to translate the beauty of Arabic so such translations are not the true *Qur'an*.<sup>4</sup> For Muslims the Arabic *Qur'an* is an exact copy of the mother book that God caused to be written in heaven. Muslims believe that God gave the words and the contents of the *Qur'an* to Muhammad.

*Qur'an*: the Holy Book, the Living Miracle, revealed from Allah as a guidance to mankind via the angel Jibril to the Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace. The Revelation began in 610 and continued until shortly before the death of the Prophet in 11/632.<sup>5</sup>

### 4. The Five Pillars of Islam

Muslims live out their faith as a way of life that revolves around the five pillars of Islam. The first, *Shahada* or “bearing witness”, is the Muslim profession of faith. “There is no god but God (Allah) and Muhammad is the prophet of God” is recited when one converts to Islam, during daily prayers, and in the moments before death. It affirms Islam’s two fundamental beliefs: that there is no other god but Allah, and that Muhammad is his messenger.

*Salat* (prayers) are the obligatory, ritual prayers observed five times a day: dawn, midday, afternoon, sunset, evening. For these prayers to be acceptable they must be preceded by ritual washing of the face, hands and feet, and recited while facing in the direction of the Ka’ba shrine in Mecca.

*Sawm* (also *saum* or *siyam* - fasting) is the practice of abstaining from food, drink and sexual intercourse from dawn to sunset during the holy month of *Ramadhan*. Though there are exemptions (some of them temporary) made for certain people (such as those who are ill), it is a time of self-sacrifice. As Muslims embark on this spiritual journey, they expect special blessings from Allah – the one God. A major Islamic holiday known as *Eid al-Fitr* (Festival of the Breaking of the Fast) ends the fasting month of *Ramadhan*.

The *hajj* (pilgrimage) is the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. All Muslims who are financially and physically able to go are required to do so at least once in their lifetime. The rites last several days during the last month of the Islamic year, *Dhu al-Hijja*, and commemorate the Islamic versions of the stories of Abraham, Ishmael and Hagar. One of the duties on the tenth day (*Eid al-Adha*) is “The Feast of Sacrifice” held in the nearby city of Mina where each pilgrim sacrifices an animal to commemorate Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice

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<sup>4</sup> Brown, *A Guide to Religions*, p. 211.

<sup>5</sup> Aisha Bewley, *A Glossary of Islamic Terms*. London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1998, p.18.

Ishmael in response to God's command. After all the rites are completed Muslims are allowed to add the title *hajji* (meaning 'the pilgrim') to their names.

The fifth pillar is *zakat* (alms tax or offerings), a very important part of Islam. The *Qur'an*, *Surah 2:77*, has a stipulated way of calculating the *zakat* which is according to one's property, business etc. "The recipients of the tax are the poor, debtors, slaves seeking to buy their freedom, volunteers in *jihad*, pilgrims, and the collectors of the tax."<sup>6</sup> Muslims are expected to be generous, not greedy.

## 6. Shariah Law

It is on the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* (the sayings of Muhammad and his followers) that Islam bases its theology, practice and law. Getting a grasp of the basics of *Shariah* (or *Sharia*) Law helps the beginning student to demystify myths and generalizations presented in the media. For example, in countries like Nigeria<sup>7</sup> and others that use the *Shariah*, deaths and violence are reported frequently and some people get the idea that this is the result of *Shariah Law*. Yet this law is not meant to be imposed on people who are not Muslim so it is important to understand who *Shariah* is meant to apply to and in what areas of their lives so the student is able to engage with current issues. This can be helpful in creating pathways of understanding as people of different faiths engage in dialogue.

In Kenya, where the new constitution was passed recently, some Muslims in the coastal area have started to agitate for the application of *Shariah Law* within a ten-mile strip of the coast where many Muslims live. The Mombasa Republican Council, a Muslim group urging for the secession of the Coast Region, has been much in the news media since it became active in 2008 after its formation in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> When Christians and people of other faiths have historical knowledge of what Muslims are referring to by "the ten-mile strip" and have an understanding of how *Shariah* affects Muslims and non-Muslims, they will be able to engage with Muslims in meaningful dialogue on the complex issues involved.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.religionfacts.com/islam/practices/zakat-alms.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Several states in northern Nigeria are under the *Shariah*, but not the whole country.

<sup>8</sup> See Paul Goldsmith, *The Mombasa Republican Council; Conflict Assessment: Threats and Opportunities for Engagement*. A report based on research commissioned by Kenya Civil Society Strengthening Programme. <http://www.pactkenya.org>. See also Daily Nation 21st November, 2011, page 4; Kenya: *Mombasa Republican Council - Liberators or Nascent Radical Fanatics?* <http://allafrica.com/stories/201206270319.html> and 'Crackpot' revolutionaries demand help from Queen by Mike Pflanz. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/expat/4195882/Crackpot-revolutionaries-demand-help-from-Queen.html> and Noel Mwakugu, *Kenya's Coastal Rebels* Published: 2005/04/08 15:08:46 GMT <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/africa/4425083.stm>

## 7. Islamic Sects in East Africa

Another important aspect of understanding Islam is to know the different groups, especially those found in the East African region. The largest of the Islamic sects is called the Sunni and the next largest sect is the Shia. Then there are other groups within these two main groups. The Sunni are generally regarded as the orthodox Muslims and they have groupings among them ranging from strict fundamentalists to moderates. The majority of Muslims followed Abu Bakr who was made first caliph (*kalifa* or deputy/successor) after the Prophet's death. Abu Bakr and the Sunni rulers who followed him were not directly related to the Prophet. The Shia however, believe that the succession should have followed the Prophet's bloodline through Ali, who was the prophet's first cousin and had married his daughter Fatima. For Shi'as, Ali was meant to be the rightful heir. Their leaders today are Imams who claim to trace their lineage back to Muhammad himself. The different doctrines and practices between the Sunni and Shi'a are important to know.

Other different groups are found in particular places because of their trades. They also differ in their religious practices. For example, the Daudi Bohra Muslims (who originated in India) have other holy books apart from the *Qur'an* and also have seven pillars instead of five.<sup>9</sup>

## 8. Propagation of Islam

Islam is a missionary religion like Christianity so it is important to know how Muslims propagate their faith. They use different methods of *da'wa* (an Arabic word meaning a "call, summon, invitation").<sup>10</sup> This practice of *da'wa* needs to be understood by students training for the Christian ministry so that when working in the field they are able to identify the methods being used and can inform the people they are working with. This would also make them vigilant as they are some of the people who are targeted through marriage.

One of the *da'wa* methods used is for Muslim men to marry Christian women, and they target church leaders, and the children of other prominent families. This is allowed in the *Qur'an* as Christians are referred to as the 'people of the book'. However, Christian men cannot marry Muslim girls unless they convert to Islam first. Christian girls married by Muslims are not required to convert, but the rules of the *Qur'an* will eventually wear them out and they frequently end up converting to Islam. For example, children will not be able to inherit property from their father if the wife is not Muslim. During *Ramadhan* tradition states that a Christian wife cannot cook food for her spouse as she is not fasting. Therefore the husband will be under pressure to marry a Muslim wife to cook for him. The *Qur'an* allows men to marry up to four wives.

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<sup>9</sup> South Asian Outreach, '*Love your Neighbor: Reaching out to your Asian Muslim Neighbour*', Nairobi: Joypet Services & Printers, 2003, pp. 32-70.

<sup>10</sup> Racius, *The Multiple Nature of the Islamic Da'wa*, p. 31.

## Why Should Christian Theology Students Study Islam?

Having a good knowledge of all these practices and the reasons behind them, helps to bring about an understanding of and a healthy respect for people of other faiths. Students will realize that there are other people in this world who believe differently from Christians, but who are just as devout in their worship of their deity. Matters of faith are personal and very sensitive therefore it is important to build relational bridges based on accurate knowledge rather than on the assumption that everyone who does not believe the same way as us should be 'forced' or 'preached to' until they see the light. Christians have a responsibility to reach out to their Muslims neighbours, but it has to be done in a way that fosters a chance for good neighbourliness rather than invites antagonism. This includes not only witnessing to Muslims, but also allowing God the Holy Spirit to finish His work in people who hear His word for themselves.

Dialogue is very important because people of different faiths have to co-exist harmoniously to facilitate social stability. The only way this can happen is when people of faith are free to propagate their religions and then leave conversion to God. Therefore the opposing adherents should not try to force people to convert to one faith or the other. The differences between religions will remain but there will be an understanding of what exactly those differences are. All religions are not the same, and will never be. This is religious freedom - that one has the freedom to be able to propagate one's faith. The Christian should be able to evangelize and the Muslim to practice *da'wa* without undue interference from people of the opposite faith.

Christians need to understand the Muslim objections to Christianity. For example, the Trinity is an area where they have problems with because it sounds to Muslims like Christians worship three gods or that Christians associate the one God with others (idols). To a Muslim this association is *shirk* – the unforgivable sin!

There is a place for the study of the religions, and also wisdom in keeping abreast of current affairs. Another way to get a feel for other religions is through the media. Newspapers give us information about what is happening in the world and what people are thinking.<sup>11</sup> Despite its limitations, the media usually gives us a good feel of current events. Islam is one of the growing religions in Africa and therefore Christian students need to be knowledgeable about it and its progress. Being knowledgeable does not mean that we are attempting to make one universal religion out of the many existing religions with the objective of making them one in essence. It is not possible to put all religions into one theological basket. This knowledge of another's religion also should not be used to take undue advantage of people who may be in difficult

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<sup>11</sup> Ajith Fernando, *Sharing the Truth in Love: How to Relate to People of Other Faiths*, Discovery House Publishers, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001, p. 86.

situations, such as famine, in order to coerce people into changing their religion in exchange for food and other aid.<sup>12</sup>

The current religious situation in Africa shows that there is an appropriate need to gain some knowledge of other religions, including Islam. Gaining this knowledge would help Christians in their human relations in their communities, countries and the world. Well-informed people of a particular faith would not allow themselves to be used by politicians or other lobby groups who take advantage of their fears of people from other religions. Also well-informed people would be able to interact critically with media stories about other religions. They would be able to identify biases and attacks on their faith and on the faith of others. Hopefully in the end the freedom of worship would also allow the different religions to propagate their faith and for people to convert without intimidation. In this sense, knowledge of another religion truly is power.

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<sup>12</sup> Dr. Johnson Mbillah, (General Adviser, PROCMURA) - presentation at a Christian-Muslim Forum, Nairobi.