

Islam

Its Beginnings and History,
Its Theology and
Its Importance Today

Robert Crotty and Terence Lovat

Islam

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A Note to the Reader

This book is based on the research of the authors completed over many years. In turn, this research draws on the research of many other scholars who have addressed various aspects of the topic. In that sense, the book is a scholarly one, but we have chosen to make it as accessible as possible to a wide audience and so did not want to burden the text with too many references and footnotes. These are mainly left to a separate section at the end of each chapter and then the bibliography at the end of the book is intended for those readers who wish to follow up on one or other aspect of the text.

Please note also that we, the same two authors, have recently published a more intensive version of our research around the same topic. This book is titled *Reconciling Islam, Christianity and Judaism: Islam's Special Role in Restoring Convivencia,* published in 2015 by Springer Press, Heidelberg, Germany.

Terence Lovat
Robert Crotty

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Preface

Terrorism is the threat of the age, or so we are told. The threat, at least as much as the reality, has at times ruined airline companies and tourist operators, thrown national economies into disarray and caused corporate collapse around the globe. The spectre of '9/11', Bali, Baghdad, Madrid, London, Glasgow, Boston, Sydney, Paris, Tunis, Chad, Bangkok, Basra and Palmyra confronts us daily and nightly through our media. Reports from airlines tell us that it takes no more than a minor scare at an airport anywhere in the world to cause cancellations of seats and even flights. In the face of rational comment and any amount of evidence about the far greater threat to the world of AIDS, TB, malaria, asthma, obesity and malnutrition, it is terrorism nonetheless that has the focal attention of the world and its media.

Behind the grip of terrorism lies the word, 'Islam'. The notion of the 'Muslim terrorist' has become a colloquialism in Western media. Interestingly, in all the history books and commentaries about the Second World War in Europe, the fascism and anti-Semitism on which the Nazi Third Reich was built is rarely if ever coupled with the word 'Christian', in spite of the fact that the Third Reich made carefully constructed use of age-old Christian biases and pseudo-theologies, just as some modern terrorism employs Islamic equivalents. The same case could be made about the Ku Klux Klan, the IRA, the South African apartheid advocates, or any number of other such instances where the perpetrators claimed their actions to be based somehow on their Christian beliefs.

Perhaps the reason that Westerners do not do to Christians the same injustice that we do to Muslims relates to our being at least slightly

better informed about Christianity, if not altogether sympathetic to it, and about its many complexities and differences. Through greater understanding, our facility to generalise and stereotype is slowed. Moreover, even in what is largely a post-church age, we seem to have too great a regard for Christianity and its principles than to allow its image to be polluted so easily by the claims of those whom we see clearly to be functioning outside of its norms and codes of conduct. Additionally, it could be that we are simply too sensitive to the feelings of those who align with Christianity to risk offending them. If these explanations come close to uncovering the reasons for the difference between the ways in which we ascribe a religious cause for terrorism to Christianity and Islam, then the challenge for restoring justice to Islam would seem to be for formal and informal education to take the goal of enhanced literacy about Islam more seriously.

We need to achieve the same understanding about Islam that seems implicit about the understanding of Christianity, namely: that it is complex and different within itself, and so cannot be generalised about and stereotyped; that it has a set of principles, norms and a code of conduct that makes terrorism as incongruous to it as terrorism is incongruous to Christianity; and, that its followers are as liable to be offended, hurt and confused when their religion is so easily associated with terrorism as Christians would be if Christianity was routinely referred to in the same way.

Not that this is to suggest that Islam as a whole can be exonerated from its association with terrorism any more than Christianity can be exonerated from its role in the Crusades or the IRA, or Judaism from recent events in Palestine. What can be said is that Islam plays some part. In reality, it may be a minor, largely *prima facie* part, and most Muslims will rightly claim that it is a perverted form of Islam that plays a part in terrorism at that. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the perpetrators of 9/11, Bali, Paris and Tunis, as just a few among many instances, claimed to be motivated by their Islamic beliefs and values. How is this so? How can a religion with such strong injunctions towards the establishment of peace, social justice and the acceptance of people of other beliefs end up being exploited in this way?

An easy answer may be that these perpetrators are just fanatics or, a little more helpfully perhaps, that they do not truly know and understand Islam other than in some aberrant way. Granted that

education in many Muslim countries does not function well, and furthermore that religious education in Muslim and many non-Muslim countries is often in the hands of local officials and volunteers with their own fairly narrow and fundamentalist understanding of Islam and/or political agendas, it is easy to see how people could come to believe all sorts of things that the scholar of Islam would not recognise.

The easy explanations that terrorists are either fanatics or poorly educated is confounded, of course, when one finds well-informed, and even scholarly people claiming to be Muslim taking up with a terrorist cause. It is easy enough to explain how a young, relatively uneducated and socially deprived zealot gets caught up with a cause leading to destruction, but what about an apparently well-trained cleric or an imam (official interpreter of the Qur'an) or a Western-trained medical doctor (as happened in Glasgow) or an aspiring medical student in a top US university (as happened in Boston)? What are we dealing with when a young man in good social circumstances, a young family, with apparently much to live for, a history of care and compassion especially for children, straps on a bomb and blows himself up together with a bevy of innocents including young children? What do we say when the bomber is a woman or a child? In cases like this, the easy answer becomes less easy. This is where the history of Islam, including its relationship with Judaism and Christianity in the West, and its current socio-cultural circumstances becomes relevant.

The purpose of this book is to address some of these issues and to restore some balance in our understanding of Islam. This will be done through exploring briefly the essence of its theology, elements of which are close to the theologies of Christianity and Judaism, as well as overviewing its remarkable achievements and contributions to science and civilised living, especially in medieval times. It will focus on the often-termed 'Golden Age of Islam' for the scientific, cultural and welfare achievements that influenced Western development so markedly in these same areas, as well as Islam's unique role in establishing some of the most tolerant multicultural and multi-faith civilisations ever known, including most particularly its tolerance towards Jews and Christians.

The book sets out therefore to recover some justice for Islam by confronting and contradicting those ideas that make Islam out to

be fundamentally at odds with the West. Our perspective is very much about Islam as part of the Western story and about Islam's own Middle Eastern origins. Our perspective is directed towards Islam as a sibling religion of Judaism and Christianity and as one that has huge potential to inform its siblings about their own origins and medieval development, as well as the development of Western civilisation generally.

Of course, we do not retreat from the reality that Islam is regarded widely in very different ways, particularly in the West, and we will attempt to uncover the causes and the ensuing troubling theologies that threaten to turn Islam into the very thing that so many people fear about it.

Above all, however, we want to paint a picture of Islam as an indispensable part of what most Westerners take for granted. Be it about modern medicine, science, education, social welfare, the role of women, of family, of human rights or of social justice, had there been no Islam, we quite likely would not be where we are today. The fact that so few Westerners recognise this is one of the tragic gaps in our education and self-understanding. The fact that, in all likelihood, so few Muslims understand these achievements is also part of the problem we are addressing.

Finally, we offer a word of caution that, while there are some clear commonalities in the phenomenon we know as 'Islam', there are also many differences in the worldwide groups and communities that go by the name. Just as Christianity has its Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant forms, with vast differences within each, the same is true of Islam, arguably even more so. The caution is therefore about over-generalising and, especially stereotyping. With Islam, we are dealing with difference, too much difference to be able to do justice to in a book this size. The book therefore will generalise, but hopefully not stereotype. We generalise with caution and advise the reader to do the same. The only way to really know about any Islamic group is to get to know that group and especially the individuals within it, a good thing to do anyway.

Notes

As mentioned in the Note to Readers, a more extended version of this book, which readers may wish to consult, has already been published as:

Lovat, T & Crotty, R (2015). *Reconciling Islam, Christianity and Judaism: Islam's special role in restoring Convivencia*. Heidelberg, Germany: Springer.

On the role of education and interfaith understanding in the whole question of the Abrahamic religions see:

Lovat, T (2005). Educating about Islam and learning about self: An approach for our times. *Religious Education, 100*, 38-51.

Lovat, T (2006). Islam as the religion of 'fair go': An important lesson for Australian religious education. *Journal of Religious Education, 54*, 49-53.

Lovat, T (2010). Improving relations with Islam through religious and values education. In K Engebretson, M de Souza, G Durka & L Gearon (Eds), *International handbook of inter-religious education* (pp 695-708). New York: Springer.

Lovat, T (2012). Interfaith education and phenomenological method. In T van der Zee & T Lovat (Eds), *New perspectives on religious and spiritual education* (pp 87-100). Munster: Waxmann.

Lovat, T, Clement, N, Dally, K & Toomey, R (2010). Addressing issues of religious difference through values education: An Islam instance. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 40*, 213-227.

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1
Introduction

Islam is a religion of enormous proportions in our world. At the last attempt at a census (in 2012), it was estimated that there are 1.57 billion Muslims across the globe. This was 23% of the total world population at the time. There are forty-nine countries where Islam is the dominant religion. The largest concentrations are in the Middle East, Africa and North Africa, as well as parts of Asia. The largest Muslim population in any one country is in Indonesia, 87.2% of whose people profess to be Muslims. Indonesia alone accounts for 12.7% of the total Muslim population of the world.

There is much research yet to be done on precisely when and where the religion called 'Islam' actually formed as a distinct religious movement. The fifth to ninth centuries in the Middle East saw a multitude of religious movements claiming to be following the 'One True God'. The dominant interpretation however is that Islam began during the seventh century CE (or the first century of the Muslim calendar) in the western section of what is today Saudi Arabia. The word *islam* in Arabic means 'submission' and this describes the basic attitude and central posturing of the religion—it is a religion about submission to the one true God, named *Allah*, Arabic for 'The God'. A follower of Islam is therefore a *muslim*, meaning a 'submitted one'. Submission describes the fundamental religious attitude and positioning of one who follows the religion established by the founder, Muhammad, an Arabic name that means 'the praiseworthy one'.

Of major importance, as well as a point of contention concerning which much more will be said later in this book, the dominant story suggests that the central character, Muhammad, did not consider himself to be establishing a new religion, but rather to be restoring a