

Every Muslim is an Arab and every Arab is a Muslim?

The image of a Muslim being an Arab in long flowing robes on a camel or horse riding in the desert is a kind of stereotype that seems to have been deliberately propagated by the media. Even some of the more respectable writers somehow imply this kind of stereotype. Indeed you'd be surprised to know that Arab Muslims constitute a small minority among Muslims. In other words, Muslims, who are Arab, make up nearly fifteen percent, that's almost 1/7th, of the total (Muslim) world population. In fact, the reverse is also true: not every Arab is a Muslim. There are many Christian and Jewish Arabs who have been living for generations and generations in Arab countries.

So this is a false stereotype that is normally associated with everything from Poppy the Sailor Man to cartoons and papers. It's not a true picture; indeed the total Muslim world population is over one billion. There are various estimates some of which are underestimated. One recent issue of the Time magazine estimated the total Muslims all over the world at 750 million; there are other studies that show that they are closer to one billion Muslims worldwide. In any case, that would place it as the largest universal faith on earth or at least a close second because according to the same Time issue estimated the total number of followers of Christianity, with various sects like Protestantism, Catholicism, Eastern Orthodox and all others, combined at 985 million. This makes Islam the second largest religion worldwide. It's a universal religion rather than something that is connected with Arabs alone.

Most people would think of Muslims, if not only limited to the Arabs, as mainly concentrated in African or Asian countries. Of course, combine Asia and Africa, there should be close to 700 million Muslims and definitely this is the largest concentration. However, on the other hand there are also many places outside of Asia and Africa with a Muslim majority. For example, in Europe: Turkey is close to 98% Muslim. Albania, which is now under Communist occupation is estimated, according to the Time Magazine -some would place a higher estimate- at 70% Muslim. There have been several reports, relatively recent, (showing) on Europe as a whole on the continental level that Muslims constitute the second largest religion or faith followed there.

Besides this of course, and this might explain the discrepancies between the estimates, there are many places where Muslims constitute a substantial minority. In Russia, for example, after the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, many questions have been

raised about the effect of that Islamic revival on the Muslim population under Russian occupation, which are estimated now at about 50 million Muslims. That's almost 25% of the total Soviet Union. In China, there are at least 20 million, perhaps more than that. In India, even though Muslims are a minority, they're a substantial minority of about 80 million. In addition, of course to Muslim presence in considerable minorities in places like the Philippines, in North America (even to some extent there is a presence which is growing), and many other places in the world. In fact, to show the universality of Islam as a universal faith there are at least 120 different countries worldwide, which have Muslims as either a minority or a majority. In roughly 57 countries, Muslims constitute the majority of the population. In conclusion, not every Muslim is an Arab and not every Arab is a Muslim.

Islam, just another religion? Sacred vs. Secular

The concept of sacred vs. secular is something that stems largely in western thinking. When mentioning the word "religion", most people living in the West would automatically associate it with the ritualistic or spiritual aspect of life: just acts of worship. With this in mind, there seems to be an implication that life is compartmentalized into two major components. One component is sacred or religious while the other is secular. The religious part concerns itself mainly with the spiritual and moral aspects of life and the personal relationship between the person and the Creator. While the secular aspect is everything that does not fall within the boundaries of this very limited definition of what religion is. As such, religion does not really play a very significant role as a regulatory force in the social, economic, or political life of the individual.

Muslims found this kind of dichotomy unacceptable and quite inconsistent with the nature of Islam as Muslims understand it. There are three basic reasons for this. On the etymological level, the word "religion" and its meaning as found in most western dictionaries has the Arabic equivalent of the word "millah". Millah means simply something that is limited and ritualistic. The actual word used for "religion" as a broader term is "deen" in Arabic, which means 'a way' or 'a way of life.' There is no single English term or word that would convey the total meaning of "deen." The use of the term "religion" to refer to Islam is because of its connotative meaning in the minds of most Western audiences.

However, it is more accurate to use multiple words to convey the meaning of deen: "a way of life" and so is total guidance in life. This does not allow for compartmentalization of life; there is no separation between the religious and the secular or the sacred and the secular. You can worship God by following his commands and way of life in your socio-economic-political life that people call secular and you can also conduct the so called secular activities according to the injunctions and broad guidance that is provided by the revelation.

The second major area that can reflect on this dichotomy is that historically speaking the development of Muslim civilization has been quite different than what occurred in the West. For example, in the case of Islam, the more people were sincere in the application of their faith in the various facets of their life the more they had material progress in civilization and prosperity. However, the more they deviated from the teachings of their faith the more they became "backwards." In other words, there was a complete harmonious correspondence between following the precepts of the faith as a total way of life and progress in civilization. This stands in contrast to what happened for example in Europe where the trend actually was reversed- exactly the opposite. That's why it is very important for students of Islam, especially if they don't have the Islamic background or they don't really have the commitment, not to try to interpret Islam and put it in the western frame of reference. They have to interpret Islam as it is. So the idea of separation of church and state is totally irrelevant in the mind of the Muslim all together.

Mohammedanism

As one scholar put it "The misunderstanding of Islam starts with its very name." Mohammedanism is not an alternative name for Islam. In fact, it is regarded as an offensive and improper title to the Muslims no matter how widespread. This includes the various derivatives of the word such as referring to Muslims as "Mohammedans" instead of "Muslims." There are four basic reasons for this. First of all, there is absolutely no basis whatsoever of the term "Mohammedanism" as derived let's say from the scriptures of Islam or the sayings of the prophet or the name even used by Muslims. They never referred to themselves as that so the title is baseless.

The tendency to use Mohammedanism tends to replace it with the more authentic title (by authentic I mean the title which is given) the name of the religion or the faith is given in the scriptures of Islam, it is given in the Qur'an (i.e. "Muslims") and the prophet of Islam used it. For over the 1400 years in the

history of Islam, Muslims have been using the term Islam rather than Mohammedanism. This is another reason; why replace the authentic term with some alien term that comes from a different frame of mind?

A third reason, when using the term "Mohammedanism," is it's given the fact that many other faiths in the world also derive their names from people who are regarded as their founders. It also gives a false impression either that Mohammed is worshipped by Muslims, if compared, for example, with the title Christianity, or that Islam has a person at its center and not a principal. So the term implies that this religion is not derived from God himself but founded by Mohammed like Buddhism for instance. In fact some of the references there is the tendency to say that 'Mohammed founded Islam' or that 'Islam was founded in the 7th century by a man called Mohammed'. This to Muslims is a very inaccurate and an offensive way of looking at Islam because it depicts a great prophet as an impostor. Prophet Mohammed has indicated that what he is teaching is a revelation that he received from God. To say that he founded Islam is like saying someone sat down and concocted some existing revelation and then goes and tells the people 'Here I come. I am a prophet of God.'

Muslims believe that the founder of Islam is God himself. Islam is the direct revelation just as God has given his word and his previous revelations to the prophets before Mohammed.

The fourth and final reason is the use of the term Mohammedanism seems to undermine the universality of Islam. I have referred briefly on this universality when talking about the Muslim population that extends all the way from Indonesia to Morocco to Europe and to South Africa. By using or relating Islam specifically to one person as if only the followers of Mohammed or people like I said who are affiliated by the stereotype "Arab" are the Muslims. Whereas, to the Muslim, Islam is the same basic doctrine preached by all prophets throughout history except that Mohammed is believed to be the last prophet and messenger of God and he came with the universal message to humanity in its entirety.

Define the Word "Islam"

Etymologically speaking, Islam is a term that connotes two things or is derived from two meanings. The first is 'salam' which simply means peace. The other is 'submission' in a sense of conscious willing submission to the Will of God. In fact the two meanings are not dissimilar because putting both roots together

it follows that Islam is the attainment of peace through voluntary submission to the will of God. In that sense, when we're talking about peace here we're talking of both internal peace within the individual and peace without. It is important to indicate here that when we're talking about willing submission that we're talking about the submission, which is not just lip service but rather a submission that manifests itself in the actual life and deeds and actions of the individual. In other words, it manifests itself in the love of God and in following the commands and commandments and injunctions that have been given by Him.

You can say that Islam, among all the other faiths that I'm familiar with, is the only one that has a clearly attributive type of title. A title that summarizes its nature to the point you can almost summarize the whole faith into one word. Which is uncommon in the names of many other faiths, which include names given by outsiders rather than the original names. Many other faiths' names, especially the larger major faiths, are often derived from a name of a person who was believed to be the preacher or derived from a particular locality and geographic limitation whereas the nature of Islam is a lot more universal as the total and complete message to the entirety of mankind. In conclusion, the word Islam is the proper term to use.

Who is a Muslim?

This can be defined on different levels. In one sense, if Islam is taken as the exact term 'submission,' then there are many creatures, animate and inanimate, that are regarded as Muslim in the sense of submitting themselves to the Will of God. Even a person who is defying the law of God and is defying the teachings of God, in a way, is submitting to God in one level at least so far in the biological function and other various aspects of his or her life that are beyond his or her control. In other words, etymologically strictly speaking you can say that the sun, the moon, the oceans, the vegetation are Muslim that they submit to the laws which are devised by God in nature. So you can say the whole universe willingly or unwillingly submit to the laws of God.

On the second level, and this is perhaps the more important one, the submission must be a willing submission and commitment that the individual makes. This means that there are aspects in our lives as individuals that we have some control over; we have free will in choosing whether or not to do things following the moral laws or the obedience to the commands and guidance of the Creator. If the person willingly submits to God in this sphere of life where he/she has a choice then there will be total harmony between compulsory submission and voluntary

submission. In a sense, when any person throughout history has to the best of his or her ability searched for the truth and then submitted his or her will to the Will of God- he or she can be regarded as a Muslim.

Of course from the jurisprudence point of view, if you're talking about today's definition of a Muslim within the limitations we can say then that a Muslim is a person who believes in all prophets and messengers that were sent by God throughout history including the last of them Prophet Mohammed and is a person who accepts the last revealed scripture, the Qur'an as the basic guiding aspect in the life of the person.

Indeed many might not realize the fact that the way Islam regards others' faith as developments, stages, or links in the same faith. A Muslim does not resort to the term religions in the plural state. In fact, the Qur'an indicates that the true faith throughout history even before Mohammed was born is Islam in the sense of submission to the Will of God as we have defined it earlier. There may have been some differences in the legislative aspects of the very specific detailed teachings of the previous prophets in history but the Qur'an indicates that the true faith from the very beginning from Adam down to Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and finally Mohammed is basically Islam. To quote from the Qur'an, there is a verse that says, "The true faith (or the true way) in the sight of God is Islam." Another verse says, "That whoever seeks any path other than Islam (in a sense of submission to the will of God) will not be accepted from Him and he will be a loser in the Day of Judgment."

We also read in the Qur'an instructions for the Prophet Mohammed to tell the people. It says, "Say O Mohammed (to the people), I am not an innovator of a new concocted doctrine among the messengers."

So like links, the previous basic truths that God had revealed to the previous prophets have finally been culminated in the most complete form in the message of prophet Mohammed. So on the basis of that it is no surprise that the Qur'an uses even the exact term 'Muslim' to refer not only to the previous prophets but to those who sincerely followed that path.

In chapter 10 verse 84 in the Qur'an prophet Noah is quoted as saying to his people, "I have been commanded to be of those who are Muslims." The exact word 'Muslim' is used here that is of those who submit to God's will.

Chapter 2 verse 128, quotes both Abraham and Ishmael, the Qur'an says, "Abraham! Abraham! (Ishmael says) Oh our lord

make us Muslims bowing to your will and also of our progeny people who are Muslims to your will.”

In chapter 112 verse 101, Prophet Joseph is quoted as saying “Creator of the heavens and the earth you are my protector in this world and in the hereafter. Take my soul as this as a Muslim (or one submitting to your will) and unite me with the righteous.”

In chapter 10 verse 84, Moses is quoted as saying, “O my people, if you do really believe in God then in Him put your trust if you are Muslims.”

Finally, in chapter 5 verse 112, it says, “And behold! I (God) inspired the disciple of Jesus to have faith in Me and My apostle. They said, ‘We have faith and do you bare witness that we bow to God as Muslims’.”

In other words, the monumental evidence that you can find in the Qur'an makes it quite clear that the title “Muslim” is something that goes much farther back prior to Prophet Mohammed and so through Prophet Mohammed the total message of Islam or divine revelation that has been given to previous prophets has finally come to full culmination.

This relates even to one of the very common misconceptions when some people start saying, “Oh look some of the teachings of the Qur'an are similar to the bible. Oh Mohammed must have copied them from the bible.” And they forget that the bible and the Old Testament and the New Testament, the Qur'an and any other scriptures revealed are coming from the same source. Instead of admitting the concept of revelation, which is accepted at least with the people who are religious, they instead turn to the idea that the teachings are copied or plagiarized.

Relevance in the contemporary world

First of all, by developing this more universal approach or universal brotherhood if you will, we can demolish the world of prejudice, fanaticism, intolerance and particularly stereotype as it relates to Islam and as it exists in the minds of people specifically in the Western World. When Islam is considered something strange, a personality cult, or a weird religion when in truth it is just at the heart of basic divine revelation in history.

Secondly by believing that all prophets are Muslims, this establishes the fact that prophets throughout history Abraham, Moses, Jesus, are brothers and not really competing with each other for the souls of the people. They are all conveying the same extensible message of God. It follows from that that those who claim to be sincere followers of those prophets must realize

then that in order to follow sincerely they must also be brothers- they must break through the walls that divide them. Yes they have differences but the Qur'an says that if God had willed it He could have made all the people follow one religion. But within this level of tolerance and universal brotherhood, people can talk and have dialogue about their particular differences in the interpretation of the divine revelation but this tolerance points again to the basic human brotherhood and the brotherhood of all prophets and their followers.