

Understanding Islam

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An Introduction

C. T. R. Hewer

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A study guide and other helpful materials for readers and teachers are available at www.understandingislamtext.com

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To Professor Dr. Khalid Alavi,

Imam Khatib of the Faisal Masjid and Director of the Da'wah Academy, International Islamic University, Islamabad, and sometime Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of the Punjab, Lahore, and Director of Birmingham Central Mosque, who was the first teacher to open my eyes to the contents of the Qur'an.

To the Reverend Dr. Sigvard von Sicard,

Lecturer on Islam in Africa at the Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, University of Birmingham, who taught by example that the teacher's door must always stand open to students.

And finally to the thousand people who followed the course on which this book is based, who by their interest and challenging questions shaped the content into what it is today.

Illustrations

Shoes in the entryway of a mosque.
Pakistani students recite the holy Qur'an in Hyderabad, Pakistan.
The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.
The Mohammed Ali Mosque in Cairo, Egypt.
A *minbar* and *mihrab* in the 'Amr Ibn al-'As Mosque in Cairo, Egypt.
Muslim men from Palestine perform Friday midday prayers.
Dome and minaret of the Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo, Egypt.
Women pray in a mosque in Mumbai, Bombay, India.
A man reads the Qur'an in the Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo, Egypt.
Page from the Qur'an in Kufic script, 10th century.
Afghan school children with their teacher.
Mosque in Al-Jimi, Al-Ain, United Arab Emirates.
Page from an Iranian copy of the Qur'an, 12th century.
Muslim women in Indonesia.
A muslim student in the Netherlands.
The Sultan Agung Mosque in Medan, Indonesia.
Muslim children in the village of Sheik Yasin, Afghanistan.
Muslim farmers near the village of Minya, Egypt.
Dome over the mausoleum of the Mamluke Sultan Qaytbay in Cairo, Egypt.
The Mecca Masjid in Hyderabad, India.
Turkish prayer rug, 17th century.
An Egyptian dance troupe performs their "whirling dervish" Sufi dance.
Interior of the mausoleum and khanqa of Ibn Barquq in Cairo, Egypt.
Courtyard of the of the 'Amr Ibn al-'As Mosque in Cairo, Egypt.
A man performs *wudu*' outside the Suleyman Pasha Mosque in Cairo, Egypt.
Tawaf, or circumambulation, around the Ka'ba in Makka during the *Hajj*.
A *dikka* in the Sultan Barquq Mosque in Cairo, Egypt.
A *mihrab* in the Suleyman Pasha Mosque in the Citadel. Cairo, Egypt.
Mosque Maryam in Chicago, Illinois.
The Mother Mosque of America in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.
The Madina Mosque in Cardiff, Wales.

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Readers will find other helpful learning tools for the volume—including chapter summaries, study questions, Web resources, a research paper guide, and testing materials—at www.understandingislamtext.com.

Introduction

The journey of a thousand miles, we are told, begins with a single step. This book is intended to be the first ten steps in the endless journey of understanding Islam. As a tradition of more than one billion followers worldwide and with a body of scholarship stretching back over fourteen centuries, Islam is indeed very rich in its self-understanding. What follows is the merest taste of the riches contained within that tradition.

It is written for people in the West with limited understanding of Islam and perhaps some misunderstandings based on current perceptions and our Western experience of Islam as something “foreign.” It aims to tell the story of Islam in a way that is accessible and so does not contain quotations from other scholars. It is the product of many years of study and teaching Christians and other people about Islam, but it is still the perspective of one person. In order to try to ensure that it is as faithful as possible to the Muslim tradition, the text has been read through by a number of Muslim scholars and by others who are involved in communicating about Islam in the West. Nevertheless, the author is responsible for the contents and follows the Muslim practice of asking the forgiveness of God for any errors and the correction of the learned.

The author is a Christian, and as such it is clear that he cannot accept everything Islam teaches or see the world in exactly the same way a Muslim does. Were that so, then the author would have to become a Muslim immediately or risk being condemned as a hypocrite. To accept that the Qur’an is the ultimately revealed scripture from God that corrects all others and that Muhammad was the infallible sinless Prophet of God, in the way that Muslims believe, would make it necessary to leave the Christian faith and become a Muslim. Nevertheless, the author’s position is that Muslims are cousins in faith in the one God, and this requires that we take seriously the message of the Qur’an and the lived example of Muhammad and ask what Christians might learn from this. The Qur’an is held by Muslims to be guidance

for all humanity and not just for Muslims; similarly, Muhammad was sent with a universal mission to all humankind (Q. 34:28).

Several principles underlie this approach. First, the eighth commandment given to Moses requires us not to bear false witness against our neighbor, and so the story of Islam is retold with fidelity to that tradition. Second, just as Moses took off his shoes at the burning bush because the ground on which he was to step was holy, so due respect is given to Muslims on whose holy ground we are about to step. Third, there is a significant difference between the ideals proclaimed by a religion and the realities of the ways in which it has been lived out through the centuries by followers who do not always live up to those ideals; this work errs on the side of the ideals of Islam because that is the way that any religion would like first to be understood. Fourth, not every follower of a faith has had the opportunity to study it in depth, and so we need to acknowledge that we may well meet Muslims who do not see their faith in quite the way that it is portrayed here. Fifth, this does not mean that we have to be uncritical of the story as it unravels; the Qur'an itself calls on people to ask questions and puzzle things out for themselves (Q. 2:266, 3:190-191). Sixth, there is a real urgency for people in the West to come to some understanding of Islam, given that over the last fifty years substantial numbers of Muslims have been born or come to live in the West. Seventh, communication is a two-way process, and so at times elements of Christian thought are presented in a way that tries to communicate accurately to readers for whom this may not be familiar.

This book is divided into ten chapters, the ten steps, each of which builds on what has gone before. It is intended to be read from the beginning, so that the foundations can be laid before looking at the details that are based upon them. Once the first three chapters have been absorbed, it is then possible to follow through different aspects, but without these foundations there is the possibility that later themes will be misunderstood. It can be used for self-study, and further books are listed in the bibliography for those who want to engage more deeply. It can also be used by a group of people, who can read and explore each chapter in turn and thus together explore the whole picture. A glossary of Islamic words used in the book is given at the back so that readers can refresh their memories about things that occurred earlier on.

Whenever dates are given, they are according to the Common Era (C.E.). In terms of years, this is the same as A.D., but that stands for *Anno Domini*, or "in the Year of Our Lord," so only a Christian properly can use that. In religious studies we now use C.E. instead. Most of the

key words and names of people and places in Islamic studies are taken from Arabic. Arabic is written with its own alphabet, so we need to find a way of using English letters to make the same sound as the Arabic word. Most modern authors use one of the standard forms to do this. I have chosen I. R. Netton, *A Popular Dictionary of Islam* (London: Curzon, 1992). Some words have become common in older forms and among them are: Muslim (Moslem), Qur'an (Koran), Muhammad (Mohammed), 'Id (Eid), Makka (Mecca), and Madina (Medina). Many references are given to the Qur'an in parentheses so that readers can become familiar with the Qur'an itself; such references begin with Q., followed by the chapter number, then a colon followed by the verse number: (Q. 2:156). Sometimes older translations of the Qur'an had a slightly different numbering system for verses. The references given in this book are from the Abdullah Yusuf Ali translation, as updated by a team of contemporary scholars, published by the King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur'an in Madina, and revised by the Islamic Foundation of Leicester, England (used by permission).