

Islam Is Not A Mystery

Islam is not a hieratic mystery, which only the initiated, a special priesthood, can possibly understand. It is, rather, sufficiently grasped by more than a billion people who, save for a handful, have been born into it, and have grown up in societies suffused with it, societies where it is impermissible to question Islam, to ponder whether its directives make moral or intellectual sense, and where any open display of questioning is punished, and any putative blasphemy or any open admission of apostasy, can result, in many cases, in a death sentence carried out not only by the Muslim state, but also by the informal meting out of Muslim justice by Believers who can, on their own, enforce Islamic law.

The written accounts upon which Islam rests are three: first, the Qur'an, believed by Muslims to be outside of history, exempt from any historical study (which can be punished), Uncreated and Immutable; second, the collections of stories of what Muhammad said and did (and these have been assigned levels of authenticity after careful study by the *muhaddithin* – Muslim scholars who centuries ago studied the chains of transmission, or *isnad*-chains, of each story, and on the basis of such study assigned ranks of “authenticity” to each Hadith); third, the Sira, that is, the biography of Muhammad, which of course overlaps the Hadith considerably (and may have been woven out of the Hadith, or vice-versa). Together the Hadith and the Sira constitute what is called the Sunnah, that is, the manners and customs of the earliest Muslims, that offer a gloss or guide to the meaning of the Qur'an, and to the way a Muslim should behave in every aspect of his life. Some believe, or claim to believe, that the Sunnah is more ferocious than the Qur'an, and responsible for the co-called “radicalisation” of Muslims. There are those who claim that the way out for Muslims is to somehow jettison both the

Hadith and the Sira, and – as one young Turk, Mustafa Akyol, a self-consciously Brave Young Reformer, used to argue – Muslims need to keep only the Qur'an, that is, rely on "*sola scriptura*." (Akyol is not alone in trying to assimilate terms taken from the history of Christianity and the Reformation, and misleadingly apply them to the case of Islam.) To this notion of doing away, in Islam, with any reliance on the Hadith and Sira, to getting a billion Sunnis (a word derived from the "Sunnah") to accept this, one can only reply: Fat Chance.

These written works – Qur'an, Hadith, Sira, and commentaries on all three – are easily available. You can find them online, a click away, and can also find online hundreds or thousands of websites, in English and other European languages, as well as in the languages most associated with Islam and Muslims (Arabic, Urdu, Farsi, various forms of Bahasa) devoted to answering queries of all kinds, websites where ordinary Muslims ask questions of clerics – about all the matters of daily life, food, dress, personal hygiene, sexual behavior, family law. You, too, can eavesdrop on these. And you can find out, again by such eavesdropping, how Muslims are taught to regard, and to treat, Unbelievers, especially in the pronouncements on Infidels from high-ranking clerics, including the Sheik Al-Azhar, from Saudi clerics, from Iranian clerics, from Muslim clerics from all over the world. All of this is available. You might start online with the excellent translation services of Muslim material – including what political figures, clerics, diplomats, officials from the Muslim world are saying to their own people – to be found at www.MEMRI.org.

But how many people will take the time to avail themselves of such material, available in such plenty? Among those who keep reassuring us about Islam – Obama or Cameron or Merkel – how many of our leaders do you think have even once gone to MEMRI.org, or to Jihad Watch, or read a single one of the

books by the Defectors from Islam? I kept hoping Obama might meet with Ayaan Hirsi Ali, whose personal testimony as to Islam, delivered with such relentless indignation, just might, I dreamed, have some effect on Obama. Such a meeting was not to be; it would have been politically incorrect. Still, I think it would be useful to ask aloud (perhaps some Republican candidate might do the asking): "Why, President Obama, could you not have met with Ayaan Hirsi Ali?" – even if we know the answer, and know we won't be given it.

Aside from the distraction that the Internet provides, when we do start to look up Muslim websites, we find the very names off-puttingly foreign. If you are the kind of person who cannot make it through *War and Peace* because of all those Russian names and patronymics you cannot keep straight, then you might have some initial difficulty with reading about Islam – think just of such words as "Hadith" and "Sira," or "dhimmi" and "jizyah," and what barriers to mental entry they pose to so many. And there is also the question of the sheer surpassing boredom of it all, as the Total Belief-System of Islam, is, in its details, horribly uninteresting. Think only of having to read through a recital, before every hadith, of the relevant *isnad*-chain – the chain of oral transmission of the particular story, right back, if possible, to the time of Muhammad, with all the various human links on that chain, as A said to B said to C, solemnly imparted, when we all know, if we are non-Muslims, what a large amount of fantasy and make-believe goes into the claims for these *isnad*-chains and their solemn studiers.

But at least you can learn about how Hadith were winnowed by the *muhaddithin* (Hadith scholars), and which *muhaddithin* (Bukhari, Muslim) are regarded as most authoritative by Muslims, and why, and just how the study of the *isnad*-chains, and the assigning of rank of "authenticity" to each of the putative Hadith through such study, is accomplished. In learning about all this, there is difficulty, there is

boredom, but there is no mystery.

And you have available, as well, the great non-Muslim scholars of Islam, those who began to subject Islam to the same kind of approach as, beginning in the latter part of the 19th century, was given by German and English Protestant historians to the study of Christianity, a study known as the Higher Criticism. That is, instead of accepting the Muslim narrative about Islam, Western scholars tried to study Islam as they would anything else, with the Qur'an and Hadith "put back into history." Among those who studied and wrote in such uninhibited fashion were such scholars as C. Snouck Hurgronje, Joseph Schacht, David Margoliouth, Georges Vajda, Arthur Jeffrey, Henri Lammens, Samuel Zwemer, St. Clair Tisdall, K. S. Lal. But this golden age of Western scholarship came to an end when Arab money bought up so many academic departments, or was responsible for the opening of "Centers for the Study of Islam" (think only John Esposito at Georgetown and his Saudi backers), where the Islamic narrative about Islam ruled the roost, and critical study of Islam in universities was no longer possible. Still, the work of those scholars of Islam from that Golden Century of Scholarship – from about 1870 to 1970 – is available not only in large libraries, but for sale in cheap Indian editions, and can also be found online.

You, an Unbeliever, now have easily available not only Qur'an, Hadith, and Sira, but the most important Qur'anic commentators, jurisconsults, historians (Muslim and non-Muslim) of 1400 years of Muslim conquest of and interaction with many different non-Muslim peoples. There should be no mystery about Islam.

But mystery about Islam there still seems to be, all over the Western world. Why should this be so, and what are the consequences of the failure of so many in the West to learn about, or to know about, or to make sense of, the Total Belief-System of Islam, needs to be pondered.

First published at