

are 124 verses that call for tolerance and patience which have been cancelled and replaced by verses such as these:

*'Fight and slay the infidels wherever ye find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war)...'*

Qur'an 9:5.

*'Their punishment [for resisting Islam] is execution, or crucifixion or the cutting off of hands or feet from the opposite sides, or exile from the land'*

Qur'an 5:33

People brought up in the Western, Christian tradition will wonder at the concept an all-powerful, all-knowing God who needs to keep altering his opinions.

In fact the ultimate test of the genuine good-will of Islam towards other religions is to ask how the adherents of the latter are treated in countries that are dominated by Islam. Although Christian societies have often had a poor record of tolerance, readers will be hard-pressed to name any Islamic country today which treats Muslim majorities and non-Muslim minorities with equal justice.

The Bible has been subjected to extensive scholarly research resulting in a vast range of opinion, including many views that are regarded with suspicion by those who hold other views. Nevertheless the scholarship and criticism associated with it are welcomed and seen as a means of reaching a deeper understanding of its meaning.

Criticism does not sit so comfortably in the eyes of many Muslims being regarded by many as an act of blasphemy. Islam, as its name suggests, requires complete submission. To criticise the Qur'an or even to seek its deeper meaning is to fight against that obedience.

#### Questions for Consideration

1. What is the danger inherent in reading a literal meaning into a section of scripture, whether Muslim or Christian?
2. What tests can be applied in order to find out what is the true meaning?
3. When Christians find something in the Bible that seems to contradict other parts, how should they react?
4. In your opinion what does the "Doctrine of Abrogation" reveal about the human perception of Allah?

## Presbyterian Fellowship



## Islam and Christianity Series

### No. 2 The Qur'an, the Hadith and the Bible



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**T**he **Qur'an** is the central religious text of Islam. It literally means "the recitation" and is regarded by Muslims as the source of divine guidance and direction for mankind. When read in its original Arabic, it is understood to be the literal word of Allah, having supposedly been revealed to Muhammad over a period of twenty three years.

The Qur'an consists of 114 chapters of varying lengths, each known as a *sura*. It is regarded by Muslims as having been revealed personally by the Angel Gabriel to Muhammad and was written down as it was recited by Muhammad, who was illiterate according to Islamic tradition.

The **Hadith** is the record of the oral traditions relating to the words and deeds of Prophet Muhammad. However the term **Sunnah** is sometimes used as a synonym, which literally means "the trodden way" and refers specifically to the deeds of Muhammad as an example for Muslim living. The Hadith is seen as being supplementary to the Qur'an rather than a part of it. Nevertheless its importance should not be underestimated as the truths espoused by him are understood as being revealed directly by Allah.

While Muslims believe that the Qur'an in Arabic is the Word of Allah conveyed through Muhammad, they also regard his actions and explanations as the fundamental model for living and a source of guidance in every age and society. Hence the Hadith is regarded as a reflection of the personality of the prophet himself.

The **Bible** is the collection of Holy Scriptures for the Christian church, written and preserved under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is in two sections with a total of 66 books, the Old Testament, written before the birth of Jesus, and the New Testament, written afterwards. It is a broad mixture of oral tradition, history, literature, prophecy, poetry, biography and correspondence. Christians regard the Old Testament as pointing towards the coming of Jesus, who is the fulfilment of all that is written in it, and the New Testament as looking back to Jesus, his teaching, his sacrificial death and his resurrection, although the book of Revelations is perceived as a vision and hope of the future to a church undergoing persecution. While opinions vary among Christians, there is great

danger in taking the words of the Bible literally or in isolation from the rest of the scriptures.

Unlike Muhammad's relationship with the Qur'an, Jesus himself wrote nothing printed today in the Bible. It is entirely the testimony of a large and varied array of people, witnesses, historians, poets, storytellers, prophets, and thinkers. Also of significant difference is the fact that the Bible was not dictated directly by God, although many of the words of the Old Testament prophets are seen as utterances from God himself.

Christians believe that understanding the spiritual message of the scriptures is something that can only happen under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who is God as he moves in and through the lives of people. It was the same Holy Spirit who inspired the writers of the books of the Bible. Their personalities, their cultural views and their attitudes are often revealed in their writing but through it all shines a single great spiritual truth. God has revealed himself through the eyes and the experiences of his people.

The keys to the New Testament are the four Gospels, literally "good news", which each provide an account of Jesus' ministry. They were written in different styles and should never be understood as a perfect chronology of his life. Each writer structured his account to present Jesus in a certain light. Together, however, they provide an authoritative record of his ministry.

The book of the Acts of the Apostles is the record of the early spread of Christianity, written by Luke, one of the gospel writers. The writings of Paul, a gifted early convert and missionary, comprise much of the rest of the New Testament. As well as his extraordinary missionary activities, his great gift to the church has been his theological perceptions that have provided the framework for Christianity for two thousand years.

Apart from those already mentioned, there is a very significant difference in the attitudes of the respective believers in Islam and Christianity to their scriptures.

Christians believe that their Bible is an **integrated whole**, progressively revealing the unchanging nature of God through his dealings with humanity until he is fully

revealed in the person of Jesus. In its pages the fallen nature of the human character is exposed and God's eternal plan is laid out for the redemption of sinful Man. Through it all is the certainty of his final triumph over evil and the perfection of his creation.

Any apparent problems, inconsistencies, uncertainties or ambiguities found in the Bible are to be resolved by referring to the rest of scripture.

By contrast the reader's understanding of the Qur'an must be governed by the **Doctrine of Abrogation**. It is a doctrine that must be understood in order to make sense out of the book's many contradictions. The Qur'anic Allah says:

*"If we abrogate a verse or cause it to be forgotten, We will replace it by a better one or one similar"*

Qur'an 2:106.

According to this doctrine, if verses contradict, the later written ones abrogate or cancel out the earlier ones. It is a concept that readers familiar with the Bible will have considerable trouble grasping. As an example of how abrogation works Muhammad's tolerant and peaceful verses written in his first twelve years in Mecca when he was struggling to win support for his new religion are abrogated by the aggressive and intolerant verses written later in Medina when his growing forces were winning battles.

The problem is further complicated by the fact that the chapters of the Qur'an are not written in chronological order.

In fairness, the issue of abrogation is the subject of ongoing debate among Muslim scholars who argue over precisely which verses are the abrogated ones. Many argue that it can be explained by a process of "progressive revelation" developed for changing circumstances.

All this has great significance when apologists for Islam make claims about how Islam is peaceful and tolerant of other religious groups, quoting what are arguably abrogated sections of the Qur'an to prove it. In fact there