

Islam: The Misunderstood Religion by James A. Michener.

What follows is a scan of an article from the Reader’s Digest May 1955 edition. Whilst researching for the book, “The Noble, Revered Prophet of Islām” I came upon across many quotes regarding the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) prior to the mid 1900s. In order to verify such quotes I set out attempting to find the originals wherever possible. One of the quotes was by a James A. Michener in the aforementioned edition of Reader’s Digest. To my great surprise, a vintage copy of the exact edition was available for sale in the United States. I purchased it and within two weeks it arrived. I have presented it here due to numerous requests received through twitter.

One should note the general attitude towards Islām, Muslims and the Middle East amongst educated, refined gentlemen in bygone times when traditional values were valued and there was some degree of respect and one can compare such attitudes to what we find expressed these days through the pencils of uncouth, immoral cartoonists. Michener is not free of course from errors in his treatment of the religion of Islām but that can be overlooked by his general positive attitude.

Abu Iyaad

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Why the West should learn the actual facts about the remarkable and unshakable faith of 350 million Muslims (*not* "Mohammedans")

Islam: The Misunderstood Religion

By James A. Michener

Author of "*Tales of the South Pacific*," "*Sayonara*,"
"*The Floating World*," etc.



ONE OF the strangest facts in today's world is that Islam, a religion which in many ways is almost identical with Christianity and Judaism, should be so poorly understood in America and Europe. Since there are 350 million Muslims in the world, and since they control many strategic areas of the earth, it is essential that we understand them better.

But look what happened recently to a distinguished Muslim who came to the United States. Count the insults we unconsciously heaped upon him:

He was shown a mosaic in a New York church and told, "See! We appreciate your prophet, too." But, in the mosaic, Jesus, Moses and Buddha were shown seeking men's souls with reason and light. Muhammad was shown with a sword, offering conversion or death.

Later he saw a movie in which brave and holy crusaders were shown battling craven Muslims for possession of the Christian city of Jerusalem. The crusaders appeared as

educated, sensitive men, the Muslims as illiterate brutes.

A newspaper carried an account of Muhammad's lead coffin, which, according to legend, hovers mysteriously somewhere between heaven and earth. The news story naturally cast ridicule on such a belief.

In several discussions the visitor heard his religion characterized as "sumptuous," "voluptuous," "sybaritic" and "pleasure-loving."

At a public meeting a speaker said as a joke, "Well, if the mountain will not come to Muhammad, Muhammad will have to go to the mountain. That happens to many would-be prophets." The audience chuckled.

Worst of all, wherever he went, this man was called a "Mohammedan," and his religion was referred to as "Mohammedanism." These are two of the most unfortunate words one can use to describe this powerful religion.

Let us see why these experiences would be so offensive to a believer in Islam.

The Founder: Muhammad, the inspired man who founded Islam, was born about 570 A.D. into an Arabian tribe that worshiped idols. Orphaned at birth, he was always particularly solicitous of the poor and the needy, the widow and the orphan, the slave and the downtrodden. At 20 he was already a successful businessman, and soon became director of camel caravans for a wealthy widow. When he reached 25 his employer, recognizing his merit, proposed marriage.

Even though she was 15 years the older, he married her, and as long as she lived he remained a devoted husband.

By 40 this man of the desert had secured for himself a most satisfying life: a loving wife, fine children and wealth. Then, in a series of dramatic and terrifying events, he began to receive through the Archangel Gabriel a revelation of God's word.

Like almost every major prophet before him, Muhammad fought shy of serving as the transmitter of God's word, sensing his own inadequacy. But the angel commanded, "Read." So far as we know, Muhammad was hardly able to read or write, but he began to dictate those inspired words which would soon revolutionize a large segment of the earth: "There is but one God."

Muhammad's message infuriated those rich Arabs whose faith required many idols, and he and his few followers were driven from Mecca, his home. Forced now to fight in defense of the freedom of conscience which he preached, he became an accomplished military leader. Although he repeatedly went into battle outnumbered and outspared as much as five to one, he won some spectacular victories.

Later he became head of the state, and the testimony even of his enemies is that he administered wisely. The wisdom he displayed in judging intricate cases became the basis for the religious law that governs Islam today. In his final years he was invited to become a dictator

or a saint, but he rejected both temptations, insisting that he was an average man to whom God had sent another of His periodic messages to the world.

By the force of his extraordinary personality, Muhammad revolutionized life in Arabia and throughout the East. With his own hands he smashed ancient idols and established a religion dedicated to one God. He lifted women from the bondage in which desert custom held them and preached general social justice.

Muslims think it particularly ironic when Muhammad is charged by Western writers with having established a voluptuous religion. Among drunkards he abolished alcohol, so that even today all good Muslims are prohibitionists. Among the lazy he ordained individual ritual prayers five times each day. In a nation that reveled in feasting he instituted a most rigorous daytime fast lasting a full month each year.

Western critics have based their charges of voluptuousness mainly on the question of women. Before Muhammad, however, men were encouraged to take innumerable wives; he limited them to four only, and the Koran is explicit that husbands who are unable to maintain strict equality between two or more wives must confine themselves to one.

A widespread misunderstanding arises from Muhammad's promise of paradise. In a land of blistering drought and sandstorms he predicted that evil men would suffer the tormenting fires of hell, whereas

good men would be transported to a perpetual paradise of cool breezes, comforting streams and beautiful houris.

Western imaginations, unfamiliar with this last word, defined it by analogy to one of the ugliest words in English and jumped to the conclusion that Muhammad's paradise was to be a sexual debauch. They were wrong. A *houri* is a fair-skinned, black-eyed woman created from musk and spices, incredibly beautiful, and *perpetually virgin*.

Last summer I stood on the edge of an Asian desert with one of Islam's greatest philosophers, and he said, "Today much effort is being spent to prove that Muhammad's paradise was only symbolic. Wise men explain away everything. But let me tell you this. I have lived my whole life faithful to God in this baking desert. I've avoided one earthly temptation after another in an effort to gain paradise. If I get there and find no cool rivers, no date trees and no beautiful chaste girls made of musk and spice to keep me company, I shall feel badly defrauded."

In all things Muhammad was profoundly practical. When his beloved son Ibrahim died, an eclipse occurred, and rumors of God's personal condolence quickly arose. Whereupon Muhammad is said to have announced, "An eclipse is a phenomenon of nature. It is foolish to attribute such things to the birth or death of a human being."

At Muhammad's own death an attempt was made to deify him, but

the man who was to become his administrative successor killed the hysteria with one of the noblest speeches in religious history: "If there are any among you who worshiped Muhammad, he is dead. But if it was God you worshiped, He lives forever."

Muhammad, the man, was wrapped in a shroud and buried in an ordinary tomb whose location has always been known. The story of the floating lead coffin arose in Europe in later centuries.

These things explain why people who follow the religion of Muhammad do not like to be called "Mohammedans." Said the desert philosopher last summer, "A Christian is a man who believes that Christ was a part of God, and the central fact of his religion. A 'Mohammedan,' by analogy, would have to be a man who believed that Muhammad was likewise a part of God, and the central fact of his religion. But Muhammad was a man. He married, had children, earned a living, died and was buried in a grave like the rest of us. No learned man would worship Muhammad. It is *God* we worship. Therefore, call us Muslims — those who submit to the will of God."

The Book: The Koran is probably the most often read book in the world, surely the most often memorized, and possibly the most influential in the daily life of the people who believe in it. Not quite so long as the New Testament, written in an exalted style, it is neither

poetry nor ordinary prose, yet it possesses the ability to arouse its hearers to ecstasies of faith. Its rhythms have been compared to the beat of drums, to the echoes of nature and to the chants which are common in all early societies.

It is written in Arabic, and devout Muslims have often insisted that it not be translated into any other language. One might expect that such a wish would have limited the spread of Islam. On the contrary; around the world men have labored to learn Arabic, not an easy language, just to be able to read their holy book and pray in the original.

The Koran was revealed to Muhammad between the years 610 and 632 in the cities of Mecca and Medina. Devoted scribes wrote it down on "scraps of paper, bark and the white shoulder blades of animals." The early revelations were dazzling assurances that there was only one God, Merciful and Compassionate: "He is Allah, the Creator, the Maker, the Fashioner. Whatever is in the heavens and the earth declares His glory; and He is the Mighty, the Wise."

It was this message that swept away idols and inspired men to revolutionize their lives and their nations. In later years, when Islam began to penetrate large areas of Arabia and had acquired much power, the revelations dealt with the organization of society, its laws, procedures and problems.

The Christian or Jew who reads the Koran finds himself on familiar

ground a good deal of the time. If the following random verses, chosen from hundreds like them, were suddenly read in a church or synagogue, the congregation might have trouble guessing where they came from.

"Cried one of the brothers, 'Slay not Joseph, but if ye must do something, throw him down to the bottom of the well; he will be picked up by a caravan of travelers.'"

"So also was Jonah among those sent by Us. When he ran away to the ship fully laden, he agreed to cast lots and was condemned. Then the big Fish did swallow him."

"Mary asked: 'How shall I have a son, seeing that no man has touched me and I am not unchaste?' The angel replied: 'So it will be. Thy Lord saith, "This is easy for Me."' So she conceived him, and she retired with him to a remote place."

Many revered names from Christianity and Judaism appear in the Koran. For example, five of the important chapters are titled Noah, Jonah, Joseph, Abraham, Mary. Lacking specific chapters of their own, but playing quite important roles are Jesus, Adam, David, Goliath, Job, Moses, Lot and Solomon.

Islam is partly founded on the words of four prophets who lived before Muhammad: Jesus, Noah, Abraham, Moses. The Koran does not acknowledge that Jesus was the Son of God and that He suffered death upon the Cross; if Jesus were acknowledged the child of God, Muslims believe it would compromise God's oneness, the belief which

is the cornerstone of Islam. It would, moreover, be difficult thereafter to contend that Muhammad was the bearer of the final perfect revelation, as Muslims do.

The Koran is remarkably down-to-earth in its discussion of the good life. In one memorable passage it directs: "When ye deal with each other in transactions involving future obligations, reduce them to writing . . . and get two witnesses, so that if one of them errs the other can remind him. This is juster in the sight of God, more suitable as evidence, and more convenient to prevent doubts among yourselves."

It is this combination of dedication to one God plus practical instruction that makes the Koran unique. Each Islamic nation contains many citizens who are convinced that their land will be governed well only if its laws conform to the Koran.

The Traditions: In addition to the Koran, Islam relies upon "traditions" — what Muhammad said and did. These are largely affectionate campfire gossip, the odds and ends that would be remembered after a great man had died.

About 200 years after Muhammad's death more than 600,000 separate anecdotes about him were current, and several great scholars undertook the job of checking them for historical validity. More than 597,000 were rejected. The remainder, called the Hadith, are accepted by all good Muslims.

Much of Islam's common sense comes from them. For example: "One

dark night Muhammad had to escort his wife home from the mosque. On the way he saw two men giggling in the shadows, so he called them to him, lifted his wife's veil and said, 'See, it is my wife with whom I walk.' When the strangers protested that they trusted him, he said, 'I was not worried about your trust of me. I did not want your faith to be affected by your suspicions.'

Once a Jew came to the prophet and protested that Muhammad's chief assistant had outraged Jews by claiming that Muhammad was more exalted than Moses. The prophet said to his assistant, "You should not have said this. The feelings of other people must be respected."

Also, some of the profoundest elements of Muslim faith and culture derive from these traditions. Every Muslim, in beginning a meal or entering upon any other task, repeats "In the name of God, Most Beneficent, Most Merciful." This is the opening verse of the Koran. Muslims greet each other with the traditional salutation, "Peace be on you." The whole ritual of congregational prayer is taken from the traditions, including the well-known call to worship.

Some traditions influenced Western behavior: "On one occasion Muhammad saw a donkey being branded on the face. When asked why this was being done, the herdsmen said, 'The Romans taught us this to prevent theft.' Muhammad reflected a moment and said, 'An animal's face is the most sensitive part of its body. If you must brand, then do it on the

flanks, where the flesh is thicker.' And the custom spread."

As a successful general, Muhammad left many traditions regarding decent conduct in war: "Faithfully carry out all covenants and agreements. Avoid treachery and do not disfigure the enemy dead. Do not slay children, women, old men or persons dedicated to the service of religion. Do not destroy sacred objects, orchards or crops."

Muhammad took a dim view of miracles, and rebuked those who sought them. Nevertheless several have been ascribed to him. The famous story of Muhammad and the mountain, however, relates to a clownish fakir of that name who lived in Turkey centuries after the prophet. In a bit of horseplay he announced that, on the morrow, he would make the nearby mountain come to him. When the mountain declined, he shrugged his shoulders and said, "Well, I'll go to the mountain."

Throughout the traditions Muhammad appears as a saintly man, one whom his Jewish or Christian cousins would have recognized immediately as deeply concerned about the nature of God. He preached that slaves should be set free, that fathers should not kill unwanted baby girls, that those oppressed by society inherit the earth, that peace is better than war, that justice prevails. There is much proof that Muhammad hoped for the day when all who shared a common belief in God would exist together in peace. It is

well documented that, on one occasion, when a deputation of Christians visited him, he said, when time for prayers arrived, "Conduct your service here in the mosque. It is a place consecrated to God."

The Religion: To be a Muslim, one must submit to five disciplines.

1. The Muslim must confess that "there is no god but God, and Muhammad is His prophet." This confession does not mean that Muhammad was God's *only* prophet. The Jewish prophets are included and the Christian prophet, Jesus, is given special reverence. What Muslims do contend is that Muhammad was "the seal of the prophets," who brought God's final message. His dispensation sums up and supersedes all others.

2. The Muslim must observe ritual prayers five times daily — at dawn, at noon, in the afternoon, after sunset and at night. All visitors to Islam testify that one of the most extraordinary sights in world religion occurs when, in a dimly lighted mosque, hundreds of men stand shoulder to shoulder, then bow and prostrate themselves as they face Mecca. It is in such prayer that the brotherhood of Islam is born.

3. The Muslim must contribute two and one half percent of his gross wealth (not income) to charity every year. Like the Christian tithe, this has become a matter of individual conscience. The principle, however, is of great importance to Muslim nations, for it justifies modern taxes for social welfare.

4. The Muslim must fast during daylight hours for one lunar month each year, and it is amazing how many devout people do so. Just before dawn a man takes his last food, drinks his last cup of water. Throughout that entire day, no matter how exhausting the heat, the true Muslim refuses food or water. Then, at dusk, he breaks fast.

5. The Muslim, if physically and financially able, should during his lifetime make at least one pilgrimage to Mecca, after which he is entitled to call himself *hadjj*. This custom arose when most Muslims lived within a few miles of the holy city. It is preserved today when men must travel across continents.

No other religion in history spread so rapidly as Islam. By the time of Muhammad's death (632 A.D.) Islam controlled a great part of Arabia. Soon it triumphed in Syria, Persia, Egypt, the lower borders of present Russia and across North Africa to the gates of Spain. In the next century its progress was even more spectacular.

The West has widely believed that this surge of religion was made possible by the sword. But no modern scholar accepts that idea, and the Koran is explicit in support of freedom of conscience. The evidence is strong that Islam welcomed the peoples of many diverse religions, so long as they behaved themselves and paid extra taxes. Muhammad constantly taught that Muslims should cooperate with the "people of the Book" (Jews and Christians).

True, there were often wars between Muslims and either Christians or Jews (sometimes because the older religions insisted on battle), and the Koran contains passages of primitive violence relating to these wars. But testimony is overwhelming that "followers of the Book" were usually given decent treatment, sanctuary and freedom to worship as they wished.

Important Facts: Many Westerners, accustomed by their history books to believe that Muslims were barbarous infidels, find it difficult to comprehend how profoundly our intellectual life has been influenced by Muslim scholars in the fields of science, medicine, mathematics, geography and philosophy. Crusaders who invaded the Holy Land to fight Muslims returned to Europe with new ideas of love, poetry, chivalry, warfare and government. Our concept of what a university should be was deeply modified by Muslim scholars, who perfected the writing of history and who brought to Europe much Greek learning.

Although Islam originated in Arabia, today only a small percentage (seven percent) of the world's Muslims are Arabians, and less than a quarter (20 percent) speak Arabic as their native language.

More than most religions, Islam preaches the brotherhood of all races, colors and nations within its fold. Muhammad himself probably had exactly the same skin coloring as Jesus — a very sun-tanned white — but today his followers embrace

all colors: black men from Africa, yellow men from China, brown men from Malaya, white men from Turkey.

Islam permits no priesthood, and because Muhammad had to fight so bitterly against idols, his religion discourages portraiture. Mosques are decorated with geometrical patterns only. If this article were to be illustrated by a drawing intended to represent Muhammad, all copies of the magazine would be immediately confiscated in Muslim countries.

For long periods in history Muslim nations strayed far from the spirit of Muhammad, and gloomy darkness settled upon much of Islam. If one focuses only upon the worst Persian and Turkish caliphs, one can easily condemn Islam as a religion that failed. But one can find similar dark spots in the history of Christianity. If one looks at the enormous good that Islam has achieved, however, and particularly if one considers the promise of this religion in new nations like republican Egypt, Pakistan and Indonesia, one sees the permanent greatness of Islam.

I have been studying Islam for many years, and I cannot see any valid reason why this religion and Christianity cannot cooperate. I know that some fanatic men in Islam preach *jihad* (holy war) against unbelievers and that they try to assassinate their own leaders to foment such war. But no sensible Muslim listens to them. They are today's equivalent of the hotheaded Christian knights who, in the Middle

Ages, vowed to exterminate all Muslims. Age cures such rashness.

Nor can I find any permanent reason why Arabs and Zionists should continue their temporary enmity. In the long sweep of history Muslims and Jews have coöperated in areas of mutual interest. True, there have been repeated troubles. But even under the worst caliphs, Jews held positions of influence and, in general, retained religious freedom within Muslim society. Today the State of Israel is an exasperation to Muslims, especially to Arabs, and a temptation to rash action; but once the immediate and pressing problems have been settled, Muslims and Jews should be expected again to exist in harmony — as they did for more than 1300 years.

Of great importance to the world is the fact that Islam, as a religion, is unalterably opposed to Communism. Sometimes when living among

Muslims I feel that God is a much greater reality to them than He is to Christians. It is difficult to believe that Muslims would willingly surrender their faith for a Communism which denies His existence.

On the other hand Islam, as a society, is in certain respects closer to communal life than it is to capitalism.

Thus, if nations of the West, by unwise economic or political moves, were to alienate the Muslim world or were to permit economic ruin there, I would expect much of Islam to embrace Communism while attempting secretly to hold on to God.

People of the West will meet numerous problems in the Muslim world. But many of them will be softened by a remark that Muhammad made to his followers: "You will find your most affectionate friends will be those who say, 'We are Christians.'"

Miscalculations

WHEN CBS hired Charles Collingwood for a radio news job, he was a 23-year-old reporter for the United Press in London. On the theory that a 23-year-old sounded too young to be a commentator, a network official instructed him to list his age as 28. Soon afterward, the same edition of a Washington paper that carried a story about the 28-year-old correspondent on one page had an account of his parents' 25th wedding anniversary on the society page.

— Robert Sylvester, Chicago Tribune-New York News Syndicate

REPRESENTATIVE Page Belcher of Oklahoma tells about a Congressional colleague who went to the aid of a constituent when she said her serviceman husband was desperately needed at home. The Representative cut his way through a mountain of red tape and got her man returned.

His reward: An acid letter from the husband saying that he had joined the Army to get away from his wife, and would the Congressman in the future please mind his own business.

— AP

WHO ARE OUR REAL ALLIES?

Condensed from
New York Journal-American

Bruce Barton

WHEN H. G. Wells was here in 1921 I had an interview with him that shocked me at the time — and has haunted me ever since.

"The best hope for peace in the world," he said, "is through close partnership between the English-speaking peoples. The Scandinavians belong with us by blood, economic advantage and democratic traditions. When the current hate and hysteria die down, we will get the Germans in. Then we will have an alliance that can really enforce peace.

"But this alliance between England and France is unsound. The French are Latins; we are Anglo-Saxons. The Latin mind and the Anglo-Saxon don't work the same way."

At that point I interrupted: "You English have just got done telling us that the Germans are Huns and savages. Now you say the French are no good and the Germans should be our allies."

He shrugged his shoulders. A historian, he said, must be objective;

history has no interest in sentiment.

If Wells were alive today, I think he would tell us Americans that the biggest fault in our foreign policy is that we proceed on the basis of sentiment rather than, like the English, on cold self-interest.

When I was a boy we were always taking up collections for the Armenians who were being massacred by the terrible Turks. Now, on the roll call of our allies, the Turks are tops.

In 1904, when the Japanese attacked the Russians, our country rang with hysterical cheers for the brave little Japs and hate for the savage Russians. Later the savage Russians were to be our allies against the Japs; now we are hoping the Japs will be our allies against Russia.

One could go on for hours in this fashion; but I am sure I have made my point — we too often think of history as one big game of cops and robbers, played by the "good" nations against the "bad." We have embarked, therefore, on crusade after crusade, too often forgetting our own long-range best interests in the hope of racing history to the millennium.

England has always played the international game differently. Lord Palmerston said: "England has no eternal friends; England has no eternal enemies; she has only eternal interests." To the English the only "good" nation is the nation that can do England good.

Isn't that the language that other nations *really* understand?