

What Does Islam Mean in Today's World? Religion, Politics, Spirituality

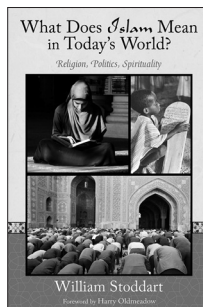
By William Stoddart

Foreword by Harry Oldmeadow

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Reviewed by M. Ali Lakhani

Dr. Stoddart begins this book with the words, “Islam is the unknown religion”. It is a sentence he first wrote over 35 years ago and, as he notes in his Introduction, his observation remains sadly true today. What Islam means in today’s world for most “Westerners” is an association with terrorism and fundamentalism—terms that do not necessarily overlap but are often conflated. This misperception about Islam is at root a misperception about—or worse, a falsification of—religion itself. Dr. Stoddart describes the purpose of the book as follows:



This book deals with the nature of religion—Islamic and other—and how, in the present age, it has become subject to massive betrayal and perversion. It also touches on how religion is falsified by being amalgamated with secular political programs, which are superficial and outward in the extreme, and which are either entirely devoid of principles, or alternatively, imbued with fundamentally false principles.

The importance and relevance of the book’s theme—the falsification of religion, and its consequences for our times, particularly for Islam—cannot be overstated. The book’s theme relates to the central question of how human beings perceive reality and their purpose in life, and it therefore engages issues such as whether reality places man or God at the center, and whether the diversity within life—and religions in particular—can be harmonized without recourse to an interiority

which lies at the heart of all faith traditions. As a perennialist—one who espouses the doctrine that all faith traditions have an underlying unity based on a metaphysical reality (or Truth) and revealed sacraments (or Way) that are handed down from God to man as part of a continuing Primordial Tradition—Dr. Stoddart rejects the false premises of Modernism and all approaches that deny the underlying spiritual reality that is the true basis of harmony.

Religion continues to be under attack in our times. The challenges it faces stem from the Modernist ethos which has resulted in an attack on traditional norms, and from the spread of Modernist ideologies within religious institutions. Citing the *hadith* or tradition of the Prophet of Islam—similar to views expressed in all the faith traditions about spiritual entropy—“No time cometh upon you but is followed by a worse”, Dr. Stoddart enumerates several of the “revolutions” or assaults on religion that have led to its perversion by “the spirit of the times”. These range from socio-cultural revolutions such as the hedonistic aspects of the “sexual revolution” and their consequent disintegration of societal norms, to political revolutions such as that of the Islamic revolution in Iran, to the direct assault on traditional religions through “New Ageism” and the effects of the Vatican II Council (1962-65) of the Catholic Church. Dr. Stoddart also cites the Modernist ideologies of Darwin, Marx, Freud, Jung, and Teilhard de Chardin, as examples of ideologies based on false premises, that have weakened traditional norms within religion and societies. A reader coming to these observations for the first time, without the basis for the Traditionalist critique of Modernism such as may be found in the works of René Guénon or Frithjof Schuon, among others, may be startled by the views and conclusions expressed by Dr. Stoddart, and while these can clearly be supported from the viewpoint of Tradition, the reader would have to turn elsewhere to gain a better understanding of the basis of the perennialists’ critique of Modernism. In this regard, the reading list appended at the end of the book is helpful, though there are several authors—particularly Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Charles Le Gai Eaton—who have written eloquently and insightfully about this critique, whose works could profitably have been mentioned.

After dealing with the reasons why religion is misunderstood, Dr. Stoddart moves on to address “The Urgent Need for Unbiased Information about Islam”, in an essay that first appeared as an article in Volume 24

of *Sacred Web*. Here, Dr. Stoddart refutes, by citing historical examples, the view that traditional Islam is intolerant in spirit, or that it was spread by the sword. It also compares the record of Judaism and Christianity to that of Islam, demonstrating how, even when one considers the abuses carried out in the name of religion, Islam often fares better than its two monotheistic counterparts. Dr. Stoddart is not an apologist for Islam, and has no agenda to whitewash the misdeeds of Muslims carried out in the name of their faith. He refers to “the abominable plight of women in a certain sector of Islam” and contrasts this distortion of Islam with “the crystalline world of mercy and beauty that is the world of the Koran and the world of Mohammed.” The issue of the mistreatment of women—like many other abuses that are carried out by or attributed to religion—has no true basis in traditional notions of religious harmony and virtuous conduct, but often derives from abuses of religion and from cultural influences conflated with religion. Dr. Stoddart is justly critical of zealotry within all faith traditions and emphasizes the fact—often forgotten by those critics of Islam who seek to portray it as anti-Christian—that the mayhem of the so-called Islamic terrorists is also directed against their fellow-Muslims. He notes:

That the Western public conflates terrorism and Islam is the lamentable achievement of the “Islamic terrorists”.

He castigates the “deformed Islam” of Islamic fundamentalism, which, in Frithjof Schuon’s words, “monstrously combines Muslim formalism with modernist ideologies and tendencies”. He contrasts this deformation with the tolerant spirit of Islam that radiates from numerous Koranic passages, which he cites in this chapter and in the epigraph, and he cautions the reader to view the deformities and misdeeds of religion as aberrations inherent in the zeitgeist of the Kali-Yuga (the “Dark Age”) in which we live. What emerges from this section is a sense of how religions, through their abuses, have failed mankind—or, more accurately, how mankind has failed religion—but it needs to be emphasized that the flaw lies not in religion itself, rather in the fundamental misperception of religion as such.

Asking the question “What Does the Public know about Islam?”, Dr. Stoddart concludes that the average person knows very little about religion in general and Islam in particular. He urges the reader to approach

both religion and Islam with greater discrimination and spiritual sensibility in assessing their depth, so as to avoid superficial conclusions based on stereotypes and the Westerner's "feeling of superiority, and often contempt", which are rooted in a false notion of progress characterizing modernity. He notes that the ethos of Modernism is anti-traditional, correctly castigating it for its devaluation of the Sacred:

Modern civilization has its origins in the Renaissance, that great inrush of secularization, when nominalism vanquished realism, individualism (or humanism) replaced spirituality. "inwardness" yielded to "outwardness", and both sapiential Christian mysticism and Platonic wisdom retreated from the scene. In a word, society lost its sacred character.

He urges the reader to try to understand the meaning of integral religion, untainted by the false precepts of Modernism, and cautions that "one religion cannot, and must not, be judged by the criteria of another".

The chapter titled "A Note on the Different Categories in the Contemporary Muslim World" is a useful primer on terminological categories and the problems that arise from the misuse of monikers such as "fundamentalist". Dr. Stoddart laments, "It must be admitted that the battle to retain the literal meaning of 'fundamentalist' and 'fundamentalism' has already been lost. Consequently, when we encounter these terms in the media, it is now up to us to figure out which category is really at stake at any given time." A large part of the problem in approaching Islam is due to the dangers of not keeping an open mind. For example, Dr. Stoddart reminds the reader of the historical and geographical interpenetration of Christianity and Islam—an important factor to recall when combating the tendency of equating Europe with Christendom. And, as the author notes, there is a good metaphysical reason, rooted in the reality of "the law of exception", to keep an open mind as a counterpoint to the absolutist straitjacketing of thought. An illustration of such straitjacketing can be found in the example of "The Clash of Civilizations" (a term coined by Bernard Lewis and popularized by Samuel P. Huntington), which the book briefly touches on. Refuting the late Professor Huntington's thesis, Dr. Stoddart emphasizes that there is no true opposition within the ideals or realities of traditional Islam and traditional Christianity, or in the intrinsic nature of Muslims and non-Muslim Westerners—rather, there is an inner harmony based on a spiritual understanding of "nature". He contrasts the "natural" divisions of religions and societies, and the "unnatural" hatred that causes the "clash", which he identifies as "a clash between modern

urban terrorism (wrongly called “Islamic”) and modern Western humanism (wrongly called “Christian”).” The Aga Khan, a prominent Muslim leader, has termed this “the clash of ignorance”—a description that Dr. Stoddart would no doubt endorse.

In several parts of the book, Dr. Stoddart highlights through quotations from the Koran and traditional teachers the true ethos of Islam, which like all religions is rooted in faith, virtue, and beauty—in a word, in the Sacred. He notes that misunderstandings arise when religionists view other faith tradition “from the outside”. The criterion for objectivity is inward, and Dr. Stoddart cites several apt passages from the Koran and Muslim sages to emphasize the catholic nature of Islam, which is rooted in its interiority. He contrasts the false ideologies of collectivism (“denominationalism” and its derivative, “communalism”) with the universalism of Tradition, which is pluralistic while admitting of the orthodoxy of forms within the diverse faith traditions:

The universalism of the perennialist does not mean dispensing with sacred forms that were revealed by God for our salvation. There is no other way than through these. The perennialist is simply aware that the Formless must needs be represented on earth by a plurality of forms. The contrary is metaphysically impossible.

This analysis leads Dr. Stoddart to make some stern criticisms of the Vatican II Council which moved in the direction of abandoning traditional forms on the basis of a kind of religious progressivism advocated by Teilhard de Chardin. Dr. Stoddart is equally critical of syncretism. He states succinctly:

The doctrine of the transcendent or esoteric unity of the religions represents not a syncretism, but synthesis. What does this mean? It means that we must *believe* in all orthodox religions, traditional religions, but we can *practice* only one.

The chapter, titled “The Gulf Between Traditional and Naturalistic Art”, which appears in this current volume of *Sacred Web*, emphasizes the need for our personalities and lives to regain their “beauty of character” and “beauty of forms”. According to a famous *hadith*, “God is Beautiful, and He loves Beauty”, and it is therefore through the development of an aesthetic sensibility that we can better identify what is truly ugly or beautiful in our lives (traditional societies are, in the words of Titus Burckhardt, “outwardly poor, but inwardly rich”)—and thereby appreciate the beauty of the universal message that lies at the heart of Islam.

This aesthetic sensibility for the Sacred is found in the universal spirit of all faith traditions, and Dr. Stoddart quotes from both Christian and Muslim scriptures to highlight the inclusive and tolerant spirit that imbues the faiths—passages which speak of “other sheep...not of this fold” (John 10:16), of God’s house having “many mansions” (John 14:2), and of God’s universal message revealed to “Messengers before thee” (Koran 41:43).

The book concludes with a chapter appropriately titled, “A Message of Hope”. It reminds the reader that “Truth will prevail”. This is because the Platonic virtues of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, are the very substance of Reality, and this unalterable reality is the foundation of the author’s optimism—even in the face of these dark times.

This book’s valuable message about the universal and essential heart of Tradition—the Truth that lies at the core of all the faith traditions, including Islam—is a timely reminder of the aesthetic and ethical commitments that a true appreciation of religion and the underlying harmony of Reality entails.