

UNDERSTANDING ISLAM

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Deposit Number 23356/2009
I.S.B.N. 978 - 977- 627-890-5**

**First Edition
2010**



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**UNDERSTANDING ISLAM,
AN INTRODUCTORY TEXTBOOK
VIEWS OF A MODERATE MUSLIM**

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**ISLAMIC CENTER
OF CINCINNATI**



Egyptian National Library
Cataloging During Publishing
Prepared by Technical Affairs Department

Foad, B. Salem.

Undesstanding Islam: an introduction textbook viwes of a moderate muslim/ B. Salem Foad

1st ed. - Cairo:

Shorouk International Bookshop, 2009.

336 p.; 24 cm.

I.S.B.N: 978- 977- 6278905

1- Islam and secularism.

I- Title.

297.5

Dep. No. 23356

رقم الايداع

I.S.B.N. 978- 977- 6278905

الترقيم الدولى

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Introduction

This is a short textbook that describes Islam from the point of view of a practicing Muslim, who has lived in America most of his adult life. In this book I have tried to explain Muslim concepts, ideals and rationale, and documented these concepts from the Qur'an and the tradition of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). I followed a logical approach to religion. My goal is to present Islam as a rational religion that seeks to improve human behavior and coexist with other faiths that came from God.

In the first chapter "Basic Muslim beliefs" belief in God is discussed as the Creator who provides for all, and who guides his servants, and who is forgiving and merciful. We understand God through His attributes and his creation. The belief that we are accountable to God shapes a Muslim's character and behavior as he tries to do good and avoid what God has forbidden. Muslims believe in all God's messengers and follow their example. They were human beings of excellent character and morals and they explained and applied God's message in their lives. Muslims also believe in God's Angels and in God's Divine Books that He sent down to his Prophets. The Qur'an came down as God's last divine revelation. It confirms, safeguards and corrects any errors humans introduced into previous divine revelation. Muslims also believe in fate or what God wills for

them and patiently persevere in the face of adversity. Belief in fate and patience is an active process as one works hard to change his fate to another that God may will for him

In the second chapter, “rituals of worship” are discussed such as prayer, charity, fasting and Hajj (pilgrimage). The rationale and wisdom of these rituals is emphasized with references from the Qur’an and sayings of prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The benefits of these rituals of worship and the effect that they have in changing our character, behavior and outlook are illustrated. If Muslims understand and follow God’s orders and are faithful to their rituals, they become better human beings more useful to others. God has no need for us to pray or glorify Him, He ordered us to pray, fast and give charity in order that we may learn and evolve, and realize our role and objective in life.

In the third chapter “the concept of Qur’anic noble character” is discussed to emphasize that our faith must be exhibited in our character and behavior. We cannot claim to believe in God unless we are righteous, truthful, kind, forgiving and patiently persevere during adversity. When times are good we turn to God thanking Him and acknowledging His blessings. We call on God at all times and we turn to Him in repentance renewing our pledge to serve Him, and we reach out to help those who need our help. We follow the example of prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as he summarized his mission saying that he was sent to implement noble character and good morals.

In the fourth chapter the two sources of knowledge in Islam, namely the Qur’an and the Sunnah (tradition of Prophet Muhammad PBUH) are explored. The emphasis is on the authenticity of both as divine sources of knowledge and inspiration. How was the Qur’an and Sunnah recorded, transmitted and safeguarded; and what books of Hadeeth are reliable and what are the criteria for judging the authenticity of the Hadeeth? I also emphasized the crucial role that the Sunnah plays in the life of a Muslim. It is correct to say that a Muslim cannot live his Islam by the Qur’an alone, and that he needs the Sunnah for the practical application of Qur’anic guidelines.

In the fifth chapter “the Seerah” (life story) of prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is discussed with the goal of understanding his character and behavior and how we can follow his example. We learn lessons from his years of struggle in Macca inviting to God but meeting only rejection and abuse, and the reasons behind such stiff resistance from his own people. Then the immigration to Madina is discussed, and how he established the Muslim society and how he dealt with both the contending Arab and Jewish tribes and the challenges that the new Muslim state faced.

In the sixth chapter “The Muslim family” is discussed to illustrate the rights and obligations of both husband and wife, as well as our obligations towards our parents and in raising our children. Then misconceptions about women in Islam are refuted, emphasizing that Muslim women are allowed to work outside their homes and have a career; that they can conduct their own business; that they are involved in their community and that women have the same human dignity as men and are not inferior to men.

The seventh chapter discusses the different groups within Islam today, and concentrates on some of the Shi’te thinking regarding the succession to Khilafa (governance over the Muslims); the question of the absent Imam; the infallibility of the Imam; Hiding what one believes in and declaring the opposite (Toqeyya); and whether Shi’te believe in the Qur’an or do they have a separate or a different Qur’an. This chapter also disputes the idea that religious scholars are qualified as rulers because of their limited understanding of politics, economics and how to govern.

The eight chapter deals with the “concept of Jihad” (Struggle) in Islam, and points out that fighting is the last resort and is done only for defensive purposes, not for aggression or for personal reasons. True Jihad means struggling to control our vain desires and resist the temptations of Satan and to live our lives as righteous servants of God . Patiently persevering to correct misconceptions about Islam and giving a correct picture about Islam is another form of Jihad. Only those charged with authority have the right to rally Muslims in Jihad to defend Muslims against aggression.

The ninth chapter talks about “the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims” with evidence from the Qur’an and the tradition of prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Such relationship is based on kindness, justice, respect for each other’s beliefs and mutual cooperation and working together to solve common problems. Some Qur’anic verses are taken out of historical context, and to the ignorant such verses may seem to suggest an anti-Jewish bias. This represents wrong interpretation since the Qur’an praises the children of Israel and enumerates God’s blessings over them. The same is true of the prophet’s sayings since some Muslims fail to understand that Islam safeguards the rights of human beings to believe or reject faith with no compulsion, and that Islam has no goal of fighting non-Muslims or forcing them to become Muslims against their will.

The Tenth chapter discusses “the role of American Muslims” and the dynamics that influences their thinking and the problems that they face, and offers solutions and a road map to the future. The sources of weakness and strength are explored and how Muslim diversity can be used as a source of strength, and what Muslims in America can offer Muslims elsewhere.

The last chapter deals with “human interpretation of the Divine text” and how we differ in our understanding and prospective. Some Muslims want to follow the Divine text literally, whether it is the Qur’an or the prophet’s sayings. While others are critical thinkers and follow the spirit of the prophet’s sayings and not necessarily the literal words because he lived in a different society and our circumstances, problems and needs nowadays are different. How this battle of ideology is shaping Muslim thought and how this is translated into the majority of Muslims following a moderate peaceful tolerant attitude, while few radicals are polarized and follow a hard line or even terrorist way of thinking. Unfortunately the views and actions of extremists are portrayed to represent Islam and the Muslims. The result is distortion of Islam and stereotyping of Muslims which leads to bias and prejudice against Muslims. The only way to deal with terrorist movements is to solve the underlying root causes of terrorism including ignorance, poverty and lack of freedom.

I wrote this Book when asked to present Islam to a group of non-Muslims at the University of Cincinnati. The course consisted of eight sessions and was mainly a power point presentation. What I liked about the format was the opportunity the audience had to ask questions, and what I did learn from these questions and how to respond to them. Such an open discussion is more meaningful than a didactic presentation that may become dry and boring, both for the audience and the lecturer. It is difficult to capture this spirit in a Book format.

Therefore, this book was written primarily for non-Muslims, and may be used as a reference textbook at universities. But it may also be useful to Muslims, who desire authentic references to Islamic concepts and wish for a logical approach and understanding of Islam.

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