

## Islam, Identity and Theological Confusion

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One's world view is a major factor in the development of one's identity and one's self perceived identity is the most significant factor in

- (a) self understanding,
- (b) the prioritising of personal goals, and in
- (c) the establishment of one's ethical stance.

It is a challenge to all in leadership roles to understand the theological input to a Muslim's personal identity and to recognise the enormous difference between this and the Christian theological input to a Christian's identity. With this understanding we will have a more thorough basis for interpreting Muslim activities in our community and for reaching Muslims with the wonders of the Christian gospel as well as in developing appropriate public policy.

### Identity

Personal identity develops in a person over the years of growing up to adulthood, but continues to be modified and expanded throughout adult life. Among the various influences to this development are one's gender, personal appearance (as amplified by comments from significant others and standards set by the media), family relationships, world view (which includes religion, values, political views and personal philosophy), social class and/or ethnicity (more obviously so when there are others around who are of a different social class or ethnicity), nationality, group membership.

One's identity is also influenced by the image that others help create for the self and is often called the *looking glass self*.<sup>1</sup> Each person needs to establish a balance between self perceived identity and the self image reflected by the community. A strong and demanding community can force one to adopt some elements of identity so as to maintain a harmonious (and in some situations a favourable) acceptance by the community which is significant to the individual. In some settings individuals seek to establish an identity which is in contrast to their parents' identity or the expectations which parents or other leaders have of them.

As Erick Erikson has stated: "the individual must learn to be most himself (*sic*) where he means most to others—those others...who have come to mean most to him". The term "identity" expresses such a mutual relation in that it connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (self sameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others".<sup>2</sup> Thus identity includes seeking to be a certain sort of person and maintaining a solidarity with the community in which one wants to belong or at least to be favourably recognised.

### Identity in Islam

The fundamental basis for identity as a Muslim is rooted in Shahada, the Sharia and the Umma. As Abd al-Wahab el-Effendi<sup>3</sup> noted, the difference between national identity and a Muslim's identity is that the Muslim is accountable to Allah in all things.

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<sup>1</sup> Wolf-Dietrich Brettschneider and Rüdiger Hein, *Identity, Sport and Youth Development*, 206.

<sup>2</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the life cycle*, (NY: Norton & Co, 1994), 120.

<sup>3</sup> Senior research fellow at the Center for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster. See *The Daily Star* February 9, 2003, quoted in [www.aljazeera.info](http://www.aljazeera.info)

(a) Re the Shahada:<sup>4</sup> “There is One Allah and Muhammad is his prophet”.<sup>5</sup> The mere recitation of this declaration of faith in Arabic means that the person is submitting to Allah and to Muhammad his prophet. It is a declaration of one’s religious stance and by implication means an acceptance of all that Islam teaches (as known through the Qur’an, the Hadiths, the Sharia and in the life of Muhammad.) This Islamic creed is non-negotiable.<sup>6</sup> Those who do not share this creed are despised as *Kafir* (infidels).<sup>7</sup> Thus a Muslim will hold strongly to this creed and regard this as the foremost expression of one’s worldview. This fixed expression of the creed (fixed in word content and in language) is the starting point of a slippery slide which leads to a less personal identity. The individual has no capacity to express her/his relationship with God in the way (s)he may desire or think appropriate and helpful. One sees this expressed in the longing which many Muslims say they have of somehow getting closer to Allah. Or in contrast one sees this in Najib Mahfuz’s statement that “God does not relate to us and I cannot relate to him. There is nothing but dead silence between us”.<sup>8</sup>

(b) Re the Sharia law: since Allah is sovereign, his law, and his only, must be obeyed (which means by definition that human laws are invalid<sup>9</sup>). Sharia law is the “unassailable word of Allah”, according to Muslims.<sup>10</sup> When something is “unassailable” it is then unchallengeable. The fundamental core of Western democracy is that laws may be challenged, as may political systems and jurisprudence. Whilst some individual parts of Sharia Law may mirror existing laws in Western countries, it is the “unassailable word of Allah” that is the irreconcilable difference. Within this law lies all the information one needs about the values, goals and lifestyle of a Muslim. There are four schools of law within the Islamic community<sup>11</sup>, which have developed because of the difficulty in understanding some texts (and the theoretical rule that the Qur’an must not be interpreted as one person’s interpretation could mean adding to or taking away from Allah’s revelation). Notwithstanding the fact of these four schools, the word of Allah is unassailable and there must be total submission to this law, and thus there is a further slipping down the slide of minimising individuality and personal identity.

(c) Re the Umma: the worldwide community of Muslims, is the primary focus of loyalty. This world-wide community is of great importance.<sup>12</sup> All who confess faith in Allah as the only true *God* and the prophethood of Muhammad become part of the Islamic Ummah. This is expressed clearly in the common prayers in the mosques and on the two main festival days - one at the end of the fasting month of Ramadan (Id-ul-Fitr). The other main festival (Id ul-Adha) includes the sacrifice of an animal in imitation of Abraham. This sense of a community united in submission to Allah is not only spiritual but also social and political. It represents both the political as well as

<sup>4</sup> Transliterated, the Arabic is “*la ilaha illa’Llah Muhammad urrasulu’Llah*”.

<sup>5</sup> Allah is the name the Qur’an gives to the divine person Q13:15-19. The word is a contraction of the Arabic expression *al-ilah* (a generic term for gods) and *ilah* comes from the Semitic root reflected in the Hebrew *Elohim*. It was also an Arabian deity known to the Meccans. See Mark Durie, *Revelation*, (Brisbane: City Harvest, 2006), 79.

<sup>6</sup> See as an example Q49:15

<sup>7</sup> Maulana Muhammad Ali, *The Religion of Islam* (Columbus Ohio: Ahmadiyya A.I.Islam, 1990), 93ff.

<sup>8</sup> Najib Mahfuz, *God’s World*. Trans. Akef Abadir and Roger Allen, (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1973), 3-17.

<sup>9</sup> This is stated by Abu al-Al Mawdudi, *Islamic Law and Constitution*, (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1960)

<sup>10</sup> Q2:2.

<sup>11</sup> The Law schools developed in a response to the need for a clear guide to behaviour. The differences in emphasis in the schools of legal thought developed because of different evaluations of the validity of some of the hadiths. The four schools are the Hannafi, the Maliki, the Shafii and the Hanbali Schools. Each is named after the original founder (all in the late 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> centuries). Reference to this in Maulana Muhammad Ali, *The Religion of Islam*, 72ff.

<sup>12</sup> Maulana Muhammad Ali in *The Religion of Islam*, argues that this unity in Islam “Is the greatest civilizing force the world has ever known” p.8.

the religious dimensions of the community. The annihilation of individuality before Allah allows for the construction of a pillar of Islam, namely equality.<sup>13</sup> This equality is uniquely experienced at a Hajj and gives rise to the intense “spiritual experience” to which Muslim writers who have been on a Hajj refer. The strength of this identification with the umma and the awareness that worldwide it is the largest religious community after Christianity is one of the reasons why Muslims have self confidence in projecting their identity as migrant Muslims in the country in which they have settled (e.g. this is particularly shown among women who wear a hijab in a Western country and among men who wear the white cap as a person who has been on a Hajj). However, the identity of women does warrant special consideration, since the publicly voiced myth of gender equality is undermined by the Qur’an and the hadiths. So I will refer to women a little later. Participation in suicide bombing or in the direct act of killing infidels is supported both by the Quranic request to kill infidels<sup>14</sup> and the support of the umma—even the glorification of such acts by other members of the umma.<sup>15</sup>

### **The lack of personal identity**

The startling consequence of an identity fully rooted in external factors is that those who find their identity in the Shahada, the Sharia and the umma have a sense of being part of a group and have what might be called a *corporate identity* but any sense of a personal identity is limited to one’s name, clan, ethnicity and birth language. The usual factors which contribute to the development of a personal identity such as personal affirmation, the regard of personal capacities as significant, personal appearance and family belongingness as something which is important to others as well as to oneself is all over-ridden by the non-negotiable requirements of being a Muslim. Thus the individual is deemed as having worth only in the context of being a member of the umma. Infidels are non-persons.<sup>16</sup> There is no specified relationship with Allah and access to the seventh heaven (the best of all heavens) is gained by suicide bombing not by personal integrity, or a reconciled relationship with the Almighty.<sup>17</sup> One can now see why non Muslims are the object of hatred, not only because the Qur’an states this, but also because individuals have no special worth before a fellow Muslim or indeed before Allah.<sup>18</sup> This is further highlighted by the practice of honour killing. A family has honour as a member of the umma and if one member of the family behaves in a way which is in contradistinction to Sharia or even worse against the Shahada (i.e. becoming an apostate) then the family has lost its honour before the umma. As the

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<sup>13</sup> For my certainty about this annihilation I refer to a Muslim writer in Morocco, Fatima Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the modern world*, translated by Mary Jo Lakeland, (Addison - Wesley Publishing Company, New York, 1992) 110. Note also Q2:13-14 which equalises all followers of Islam.

<sup>14</sup> Q4:89 *Those who reject Islam must be killed. If they turn back (from Islam), take (hold of) them and kill them wherever you find them...* Q8:12 *I will instil terror into the hearts of the Unbelievers: smite ye above their necks and smite all their fingertips off them.’ This because they contended against Allah and His Messenger, Allah is strict in punishment.* Q9:5 *But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war). But if they repent, and establish regular prayers and practise regular charity, then open the way for them: for Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful.* See also Q8:14-17, 59-60; 9:5, 29,123; 47:4; 5:51, 57.

<sup>15</sup> Qur’an promises a heaven full of wine and sex for those who faithfully kill infidels Q56:10-22, 35-37; 2:25.

<sup>16</sup> Q4:89, 95; 8:12,14-17, 59-60; 9:5, 29,123; 47:4; 5:51, 57.

<sup>17</sup> Q4:89, 95; Q9:110-114; 22:58-9; 44:45-59; 52:17-24

<sup>18</sup> See Bat Ye’or, *Islam and Dhimmitude*, (Lancaster, UK: Gazelle Book Services, 2002) for an outline of the reduction of personal status of non-Muslims who agree to pay the tax (jizya) so as not to be killed or made a slave. Also Q9:29

fundamentals of Muslim identity are non-negotiable, the only way forward is to kill the person who has brought dishonour and thus enable the family to regain its honour within the umma.<sup>19</sup>

### **Muhammad's attempt at identifying his religion with the Judeo-Christian faiths.**

Muhammad learnt about the Judeo - Christian faiths from the Egyptian monks who were living in the desert between Syria and Mecca.<sup>20</sup> His own religious context was the worship of a multiplicity of divine beings all of whom were represented at the Ka'bah in the centre of the souk (market place) in Mecca. Each bedouin tribe had its own divinity.<sup>21</sup> Muhammad could see that by having only one Divine being the division and the fighting between the tribes could be overcome and a new sense of unity amongst all Arabic speaking peoples could be established. He thus had a challenging message – there is only one God. To make logical sense of this proclamation, this One Divine Being had to pre-exist Muhammad. He had his answer in the Torah. God had revealed himself to the patriarchs and the prophets of old<sup>22</sup> and had further revealed himself in Jesus (as recorded in the *injl*). Muhammad was now the final prophet as predicted by Isa (John 14:15) and hinted at by the Priests and the Levites (John1:21b).<sup>23</sup> All the patriarchs, prophets and Isa are described as being Muslims – after all they all did submit to God. In Muhammad's view both he and Abraham received global responsibilities to proclaim the revelation of God.<sup>24</sup> This link with Abraham has been used by some Christians to argue for a sense of belongingness between the three “Abrahamic Faiths”. But this has only developed ambiguity and confusion. It has not enhanced attempts at dialogue and has not been useful in attempts at evangelism. It has been used by Muslims to pacify Christians and to cause some to accept that there is little difference between the three faiths. However, the Qur'an rejects the deity of Jesus, and His atoning work.<sup>25</sup> The Qur'an has no concept of God's covenant love, and whilst forgiveness is available for those who turn to Allah and Muhammad as Allah's prophet, there is no statement about forgiveness of sins and of reconciliation with God. Isa will return according to a Hadith and will destroy all religions other than Islam.<sup>26</sup> Isa will also “break the cross”, which means he will abolish the Christian faith and Isa will be a “follower of Muhammad implementing Sharia law”.<sup>27</sup> Certainly, Isa of the Qur'an is not Jesus of the New Testament. There are references to a spirit in the Qur'an, but the references do not understand the Spirit to be God the Holy Spirit.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Maulana Muhammad Ali in *The Religion of Islam*, argues that the Qur'an does not require the death of an apostate and quotes the Mecca Q2:256 that *there is no compulsion in religion* (p.439), but the Hadith (which is just as significant as the Qur'an) does declare the need to kill an apostate. See Hadith Bukhari Vol. 9 book 88, No. 6922 & Vol.4 book 56, No.3017; and there are numerous examples of this penalty being carried out. See Robert Spencer, *The Truth about Muhammad*, (Washington: Regeneray Publishing, 2006),147ff.

<sup>20</sup> See A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, (Oxford: OUP, 1955), Robert Spencer, *The Truth about Muhammad*, and W. Montgomery Watt, *The Majesty that was Islam*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974).

<sup>21</sup> Hadith Vol.3 No.658 and Vol.5 No.583.

<sup>22</sup> Q29:46-47.

<sup>23</sup> As Muslims assert. Q3:15-19, 40-49 (the word in English – *worship / submission* – in Arabic is *Islam*); 5:45-49; 61:5-9.

<sup>24</sup> Abu al-Al Mawdudi, *Islamic law and Constitution*, trans. Khurshid Ahmed, (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1960). See Q2:75-79, 125-135, 285-289; 3:60-64; 6:80-89.

<sup>25</sup> Q3:50-54; 4:115-119,165-169; 9:30-34; 10:66-74; 25:1-4.

<sup>26</sup> Sunan Abu Dawud, Book of Battles, 37:4310, find this at [www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah/abudawud](http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah/abudawud)

<sup>27</sup> Nuh Ha Mim Keller, *The Reliance of the Traveller*, (rev.ed. Beltsville, Maryland: Amana Publications, 1994), 603.

<sup>28</sup> Q19:15-19; 78:35-39; 66:10-14;

The earlier revelations are deemed to have been corrupted (e.g. *they twist their tongues with the Book that you may suppose it part of the Book, yet it is not part of the Book and say it is from Allah, yet it is not from Allah* Q3:70-74.<sup>29</sup> The People of the Book would finally be relieved of their ignorance when Allah recited the pages purified and thus provides the true book (Q98:1-4).<sup>30</sup> In the meantime, the Muslim position is that Allah is the God of the Bible as the Bible was originally revealed (Q29:46; 3:110). Muslims say that we do not have this original revelation; what we do have is a corrupted edition. On this basis Muslims press Christians to become obedient to the Qur'an and to Muhammad on the grounds that the Quranic revelation of Allah is the one true and final revelation of God. This is the first step in the Islamisation of Christian thought. Allah is identified with YHWH and Islam seeks to root its identity in the OT and NT revelation. It considers itself to be the final and complete revelation of God. Thus the attempt at identifying Allah with God and Isa with Jesus results in theological confusion and untaught lay people are vulnerable to Muslim *dahwa* (outreach) activity. The Islamisation of Biblical persons and the re-writing of some parts of Biblical history (e.g. Isaac being replaced with Ishmael and he with Abraham going to Mecca for the sacrifice) becomes a challenge to Christians to know their biblical history, to understand the doctrines identified in the Nicene creed and to have assurance about the Canon of Scripture. Those hoping for a useful dialogue will find themselves in total opposition to the teaching of a Muslim with the result that the dialogue becomes adversarial and this is why dialogue never works. Or the Christian who is looking for a basis for harmony may tend to give way on some historical detail in the hope of winning over some Muslims to a co-operative spirit. Yet in doing so they actually Islamicise their own theology.

There are two other areas of identity in Islam to which I should make brief reference. One is in respect to Muslim women and the other Muslim youth migrants. Both categories could sustain a major paper in its own right. There is no need to be detailed in this paper.

In respect to women, their status in Islam may be somewhat better than it was as Bedouins in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. However, they are regarded by Muhammad as property which men can use as they wish (Q2:223). Men are superior to women (Q4:34). Women are deficient intellectually and in religion<sup>31</sup>. They are deficient as witnesses (Q2:282). Women are like crooked ribs which cannot be straightened<sup>32</sup>. As Ed Husain was taught, women are like the plague!<sup>33</sup> Women should never leave their house since their sexuality becomes an attraction to the devil<sup>34</sup>. An unveiled woman is so deeply sinful that she causes the angels to flee.<sup>35</sup> It is this same argument that states that a woman must not pass by a man when he is praying otherwise his prayer becomes ineffective. The total impact of this attitude to women is well described by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Somali immigrant to Holland and now living in the USA, that "*as a Muslim girl, you disappear, until there is no you inside you*".<sup>36</sup> Education is not seen as essential for girls. In the West Muslim women wear the veil (*hijab*) as a symbol of their rejection of western values and of allegiance with the Muslim world. *Sharia* marriages, forced marriages and divorce are a growing issue in the West. The practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) is very common in the Muslim community. The identity of a woman is promoted by Muslims as being better than it was in tribal Arabia, but their

<sup>29</sup> See also Q2:70-74; 3:70-74, 180-185; 6:90-94; 4:45-49. Also expanded in Keller, *Reliance of the Traveller*, 811.

<sup>30</sup> See also Q4:50-54; 5:15-19; 57:25-29; 3:105-109, 195-199; 58:20-24; 98:5

<sup>31</sup> Bukhari hadith Vol. 2 Book 24, No.541. But Nimat Hafez Barazangi in *Women's Identity and the Quran*, (Gainesville: Uni Press of Florida 2004) argues that a new interpretation of the Quran can lead to a better view of women as autonomous beings.

<sup>32</sup> Bukhari hadith Vol.7 No. 113.

<sup>33</sup> Ed Husain, *The Islamist*, (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 134.

<sup>34</sup> Kanz-el-Ummal hadith Vol.22 No. 858.

<sup>35</sup> A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 107.

<sup>36</sup> Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Infidel*, (London: Free Press, 2007), 94.

status is reduced to that of a man's chattel. They still see themselves as of no worth, but still part of the umma and gain such personal status as they can out of this idea.

In respect to Muslim migrant youth, for many there is a frustration with the religious expression of their parents and the difficulty of integrating with non-Muslims in their country of residence. For many there is a problem of limited education and limited capacity to gain satisfying jobs. Many live in ghettos and so reinforce attitudes among themselves and look for extreme expressions of behaviour, such that many join up with radical groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir.<sup>37</sup> They gain a different identity to their parents through the association with other aggressive youth and with radical organisations.

The identity of a Muslim rooted as it is in the Qur'an, has no connection with the identity of a Jew or a Christian. For all within the Judeo-Christian sphere of thought there is the fundamental fact that we are created in the image of God and that even God's holiness is attributed to us through a sacrificial act. This theology provides us with the basis of knowing that everyone of us as individuals matters to God and so each one of us is important to one another. Not only us as Christians or as Jews, but all human beings are created by YHWH and thus all are the object of God's love. Our unity as a people is found in Christ for only in Him will there be a path to unity that transcends ethnicity, economics, social status, and class, because our true identity is found in our Creator in whose image we are made and in whose love we can be reconciled to Him and to one another.

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<sup>37</sup> Institute for the Study of Islam and Christianity, *Islam in Britain*, (Pewsey: Isaac Publishing 2005), 38ff, and Ed Husain, *The Islamist*.