

What can we learn from Islam?

MY brother is a Muslim. So my confused parents have one Islamic son, while the other is an Anglican priest.

That makes for some really interesting family discussions around the Christmas dinner table, let me tell you! But it also means that I have been pondering whether we Christians have anything to learn from Islam.

All Muslims are expected to submit to a way of life which is centred around five 'pillars' - confession (of the oneness of God), prayer, fasting, giving and pilgrimage. These are pretty strict laws which govern the way that a committed Muslim should believe, pray, eat, give and make pilgrimage.

The word 'Islam' itself means 'submission', and implies submitting to God and God's laws. Muslims essentially believe that how we live will determine whether or not we spend eternity

the big issue



There are major differences between Christianity and Islam. But we can still learn much about faith from Muslims, argues the Rev Tom Kennar, curate at Emsworth and Warblington.

with God (one of the symbols of Islam is a set of scales, on which good and bad deeds are compared).

Christians, on the other hand, have a long inheritance of freedom from certain laws. We essentially hold that Jesus has fulfilled the ancient law.

While we hold on to its major themes, we are no longer bound by the minutiae. That's why my brother has to look on enviously every time I have a bacon sandwich!

God has saved us, through Jesus, by grace - not by our good works. But Christianity has a strong heritage of 'doing good

works' too. (For example, James 2: "Faith without deeds is dead").

However, I suggest that we may, in fact, have some things to learn from the practice of Islam that could strengthen the way that we live as Christians.

Take, for example, the Muslim concept of prayer. The devout Muslim is called, five times a day, to worship God. In doing so, Muslims remind themselves of who God is, consciously keeping God as a focal point to everything they do in each day.

Within Christianity, convents and monasteries have invited us for generations to participate in this kind of regular, worshipful,

outward-looking prayer, at key points in the day.

But I think, if we are honest, many Christians struggle to spend time worshipping God even once a day. Could it be that with the assurance of salvation offered to us in Christ, we can sometimes take God a little bit for granted - and fail to feed spiritually from the source?

Charitable giving is another area where we might find ourselves challenged by Muslim practice. The giving of 'zakat' - charitable gifts - is an expectation of Islam.

Anyone who does not give regularly to charitable causes has no right, in Islam, to call themselves a Muslim. Charitable giving is the most basic of good deeds in a religion that is based on good deeds.

Many Christians, however, have a rather different approach. Could it be that because we know our future in Christ is secure, we sometimes neglect the duties of our faith? Or perhaps, like Muslims, we tend to believe that

God will save us because of the good things we do?

Pilgrimage (the hajj) is another vital Muslim practice - when rich and poor dress in the same, simple, two-piece clothing to gather together in the same holy site. Pilgrimage is another ancient Christian custom, and we could all benefit by paying greater attention to that principle.

Fasting is another much neglected discipline that could teach us the importance of relying on spiritual food - and that there is more to life than an always-full tummy.

Perhaps it is just possible that our Muslim friends and neighbours may be able to help us to be better Christians - while we share with them the fantastic news that Jesus has already done all that is needed for them (if they will but trust in him) to spend eternity with God.

And perhaps we also need reminding that good works are good stuff...as long as we don't rely on them to open the door to heaven.

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Deciding on a school for your children is a tremendously important choice. In many cases a child's primary and secondary education can have repercussions throughout life. With growing concerns surrounding much of education in Britain today, it should come as little surprise that Christian schools maintain their popularity with parents, providing a strong spiritual and moral basis in all that they do. Their academic results continue to impress and in many cases improve.

Christian schools continue to be popular and are approached by parents from across the denominations, as well as other faiths, who wish to ensure that their children can enjoy a start to life based on a firm foundation.

Christian schools, therefore, often have waiting lists or entrance examinations to help them maintain their standards of excellence, or offer open days for parents and prospective pupils to look around at what is on offer. Some schools will still be taking pupils for the new-year starting in September, but others will already be looking at the September 2008 intake.

It's a very similar story with further education and whilst most students will have already decided on a university or college to attend from the autumn semester, some will still be looking for a course and others will start planning for next year.

Other ways of learning

There are many colleges, which offer the subject of theology through distance learning, and is ideal for students with commitments, which stop them, being involved in full time education. For some, distance learning offers the opportunity to take a specialist subject to a new level.

Of course, it is not just theology that will be of interest to Christians. There are many other subjects and skills that can enable them to become more efficiently involved in the work of the Church or within society at large. These can involve anything from secretarial skills to counselling. Developing artistic abilities can also be put to good use in the service of God.

The real message of lifelong learning is that it is never too late to learn a new skill, or study a new subject or to re-investigate the opportunity to study a subject that for some reason or another had to be dropped in the past.

See page 5 for details of outstanding OFSTED reports from our church schools.



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