

Salaam on Islam
by Paul-Gordon Chandler
(published in the *Anglican Digest* in 2004)

Salaam on Islam. *Salaam* is the Arabic word for “peace”, and I profoundly believe that a peaceful approach to looking at and working in the Islamic world is Christ’s way forward. Not only did I grow up in the Muslim world, I have spent most of my life there, and many of my best friends are Muslims. And never before have I seen so many Christians in the West openly and genuinely interested in learning about Islam, seeking to understand Muslims. I have found this most encouraging.

At the same time it is disturbing to see another circle of Western Christians “demonize” Islam, with supposed experts popping up to lend their views, creating an Islamaphobia that results in many seeing Islam as an enemy and vice versa. There is a quickly growing discord between Christians and Muslims, with many Christians portraying Islam as “the last great enemy to be conquered”. The images are often militant—from capturing Islamic strongholds to reclaiming the land. While it is often just meant within “the spiritual realm”, the images they project of Islam, particularly of its relations with Christianity, are often unbalanced, one-sided and can even be mythical—presenting Muslims as dangerous people. There is rarely a positive description of a Muslim. The oft-held idea of conversions taking place by the sword from the Middle Ages on is, for example, an inaccurate depiction much propagated in anti-Islamic literature.

From living most of my life among Muslims, the truth is that the majority do not see themselves in any holy war against the West, and are peace-loving, great friends, incredibly hospitable, gentle and kind. There never has been a greater need for us to realize what we have in common with Muslims and build on those commonalities.

St. John of Damascus can serve as a initial guide. He was one of the greatest theologians in the seventh century, just after the death of Mohammad, and grew up a Syrian Christian in the Islamic Arab court of Damascus, where his Christian father was chancellor. As an adult he was an intimate friend of the Caliph, becoming the finance minister himself. This relationship made him one of the very first Arab Christians capable of acting as a bridge between Christianity and Islam. In old age, he became a monk and wrote the first-ever Christian treatise on Islam. While he of course did not agree with all of Islam’s theological tenets, he nevertheless applauds the way Islam moved the Arabs from idolatry and polytheism and writes with admiration of its single-minded emphasis on worshipping the “one true God”.

There has been a kinship over the ages that both Muslims and Christians have been aware. Indeed, during Islam’s expansion in the Middle East following Mohammad’s death, many eastern Christians welcomed the Arab Muslim armies as liberators, as they were oppressed by the Byzantine Christian West.

When spending time among Christians in the Middle East, we become aware of how much early eastern Christian tradition formed the foundation for the basic practices of Islam. The Muslim form of prayer, with prostrations and bowings, comes from the ancient Syrian Orthodox Christian tradition and is still practiced today. The month long fast of Ramadan is an Islamicisation of Christian Lent, and some Eastern Churches still practice an all-day fast. The architecture of the earliest minarets, square instead of round, came from the church towers in Byzantine Syria. The same could be said about their pilgrimage, creed, and prayer five times a day facing their holy city--all having Christian origins.

If a Christian from sixth-century Byzantium were to return today, he would find much more that was familiar in the practices of Muslims, than in a contemporary American evangelical church. Most Western Christians have lost the understanding that our faith is also a Middle Eastern faith in origin, consequently losing their true sense of identity.

There has never been a time where building upon any kinship and proximity between the Christians and Muslims has been so critically needed--rather than act and speak in ways that create further alienation. What Muslims need from Western Christians is love. We must be involved today in an effort to help them, not "conquer them", by good-will, appreciation and sympathy—in the spirit of Christ. As my friend Christine Mallouhi says, now is the time to "wage peace" on Muslims. For they, like us, are made in God's image. *Salaam* on Islam.