

## **Islam, Politics and why it matters for us.**

**Reverend Felicity O'Brien**

### **Introduction**

This talk is about the religion that is called Islam. First we look at its beginnings with a brief historical overview, noting the great divide between two parts of Islam, Sunni and Shi'a, and some of the consequences of that split. We will explore briefly the spread of Islam and Muslim peoples throughout the world, both in ancient and modern times. We will look more closely at some of the groups in both Sunni and Shi'a, and how this plays out both religiously and politically, especially the more radical sector. Then we will explore the interaction of other countries with Islamic nations, the geopolitical scene, where differences between Islamic factions have been exploited by outsiders, in particular the U.S.

Finally, we will consider why this matters to us in New Zealand, especially to Christians, and I apologise to members of the audience who are not included in this group, but that is where my perspective comes from, as a minister in the Anglican Church.<sup>1</sup>

### **Part 1: History of Islam**

Fourteen hundred years ago, in a mountain cave, an Arab businessman was praying, worried about how his society was deteriorating. Money-making was becoming all-important, and the poor were getting poorer. People were

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<sup>1</sup> Note: I have followed the spelling conventions of Arabic words as used by the textbook for the course: *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations*. Ed. Woodhead, Linda

restless, and knew that other surrounding countries practised more sophisticated religions than the Arab paganism. Some believed that their own highest God, Al-Lah (which means ‘God’) was the same deity as that worshipped by the Jews and Christians. But there had as yet been no prophet and no revelation to the Arabs in their own language. The man in the cave, Muhammad ibn Abdallah, woke one night overpowered by a mighty presence of the Angel Gabriel, and then he heard words of poetry pouring from his mouth. Tradition has it that he was illiterate, so therefore the elegant words must have come supernaturally.<sup>2</sup>

He told no one except his wife and her cousin, who was a Christian, about this at first, but as he received more revelations he began to share them. The message was simple: Al’Lah, or Allah, whom they already knew, was the *only* God, and he was indeed the world’s creator. Society was urged to share wealth and care for the weak and vulnerable. Complete surrender to God was what was needed. This surrender is called *Islam*. A person who surrenders is called a *Muslim*, and Muslims were required to pray, prostrate, three times a day, later amended to five times.<sup>3</sup> Islam was not seen as a new religion, rather a reminder of the old truths preached by prophets, leaving aside minor deities and following Allah. The Qur’an, the scripture that was given to Muhammad, affirms this many times, and insists that “ ‘there shall be no coercion in matters of faith,’ ”<sup>4</sup> and that the beliefs of Jews and Christians shall be respected. In addition to praying five times a day, Muslims are encouraged to make a pilgrimage (hajj) to Meccah, to worship at the Kabah, a religious site that was ancient even in Muhammad’s time. Gradually Muhammad acquired followers for the umma, the Muslim community,

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<sup>2</sup> However, as a merchant he must have had some basic literacy -See Hazleton 2009 p.48,9

<sup>3</sup> Armstrong 2000 pp.3-5

<sup>4</sup> Armstrong 2000 p.9

although with much opposition. Muhammad fled to Yathrib where he had been invited to lead the city, and he built a simple mosque. This is a very complex tale, told very briefly, and I invite you to read more at length in some of the resources listed below.

So far, it all sounds reasonable. A prophet reminds people of what they already knew, that the God who created them expected them to submit to him and treat each other with justice and compassion. In 632 Muhammad died. On his deathbed he said that “We have the Qur’an, the book of God, and that is sufficient for us”,<sup>5</sup> and named no successor. Perhaps “leadership was not something to be inherited, like property. It had to be decided by merit, not by blood.”<sup>6</sup> The most obvious successor was Muhammad’s young cousin and son-in-law Ali, who had been the first to accept the new faith, at the age of thirteen. His followers were known as Shi’at Ali, followers of Ali, or Shi’a for short. However, Muhammad had not actually designated him as his successor, and Ali had come into conflict with Muhammad’s favourite young wife, Aisha,<sup>7</sup> whose father was Khalifa, or deputy, Abu Bakr. The four deputies disagreed about the future shape of Islam, whether each tribe should have its own leader, or whether the whole umma should be united under a single ruler- “Islam was seen less as a rejection of existing faiths than as an elevation of them into a new, specifically Arabian identity.”<sup>8</sup> Whether the umma was united or divided, the Qur’an would be supplemented by the practice of Muhammad – the *sunna* – the traditional Arab word for the traditions or customs of one’s forefathers. Muhammad’s widow Aisha, the daughter of Khalifa Abu Bakr, would become a “major

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<sup>5</sup> Omar in Hazleton 2009 p.50

<sup>6</sup> Hazleton 2009 p.63

<sup>7</sup> counseling divorce when there was a scandal involving a necklace Hazleton 2009 p.18ff

<sup>8</sup> Hazleton 2009 p.40

source of *hadith*- the reports on the prophet's practice.<sup>9</sup> The Sunnis took their name from *sunna*, although the Shi'a would follow nearly all the same traditions.<sup>10</sup> The Sunni Islamic community sees itself as sacred, thereby free of error, so "any Muslims who disagreed with the Sunni majority could only be in error: the Shi'a, by force of their disagreement, were not part of the true community of Islam as defined by Sunnis."<sup>11</sup> When Abu Bakr was named leader, Ali's followers felt cheated, humiliated, passed-over. They had been disinherited from "what they saw as their rightful place, the leadership of Islam. And this sense of disinheritance would sear deep into Shi'a hearts and minds, a wound that would fester through to the twentieth century, there to feed off oppositions to Western colonialism and erupt first in the Iranian Revolution, then in civil war in Lebanon, and then, as the twenty-first century began, in the war in Iraq".<sup>12</sup>

## **Part 2: The Spread of Islam**

In the early years of Islam, its expansion was rapid. Ongoing unity would be fostered by an outward-looking perspective – the umma started to attack its neighbours, first Iraq, Syria and Egypt, and then the whole of the Persian Empire, and into the Byzantine Empire.<sup>13</sup> A century after Muhammad's death, the Islamic Empire would extend from the Himalayas to the Pyrenees.<sup>14</sup> Arabs already owned estates in neighbouring countries and traded extensively with their neighbours, putting down roots.<sup>15</sup> The Byzantine Empire in the west was declining, and the Persian in the east was

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<sup>9</sup> Hazleton 2009 p.74

<sup>10</sup> Hazleton 2009 p.50

<sup>11</sup> Hazleton 2009 pp.61,2

<sup>12</sup> Hazleton 2009 pp.70,71

<sup>13</sup> Armstrong 2000 p.20

<sup>14</sup> Armstrong 2000 p.25

<sup>15</sup> Hazleton 2009 p.80

nearly bankrupt. Timing was perfect for an Arab, Islamic take-over. But it was not a religious move – Islam would not be imposed on conquered territories – Muslims wanted to keep the faith pure, that is, Arab. There was much jostling for power, involving assassinations and bloodshed as to who should lead the Islamic Empire, as it was now becoming. By 656, Ali was finally leader. He would not take the title of *Khalifa* – deputy, rather, *Imam*, he who stands in front. The Sunnis would recognize him as the fourth Khalifa or caliph, while the Shi'a would recognize no other caliphs -Ali was the rightful leader. He would be the first of twelve Imams. There was a permanent three-way split between those who would follow the genealogical succession (the Shi'a) – those who followed the tribal principle – (the Sunnis), and a smaller group of those who followed the charismatic principle – the Kharijites, as most worthy, and this split continues to this day.

<sup>16</sup>Against this backdrop of regime-change and politicking, Islam would spread throughout much of the known world, as far as Spain in the west, all the way to Vienna in the north, Central Asia, India in the East, and over much of northern Africa.

We'll skip forward a few hundred years, over the crusades where Christendom tried – and failed – to liberate the Holy Land from Islam. This huge empire collapsed in the tenth century, only to further expand with the Seljuk Turks <sup>17</sup> and the Ottoman Empire, the Mongols and with trade especially in India and Africa, reaching its largest expanse in the late seventeenth century. <sup>18</sup> European expansion in the nineteenth century stimulated conversion of sub-Saharan Africa to both Christianity and Islam.

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<sup>16</sup> Küng 2004 p.185

<sup>17</sup> Robinson 1982 p.26

<sup>18</sup> Waines 2001 p.239

Today (2013) there are estimated to be more than one billion Muslims in the world, second only to Christianity in numbers.<sup>19</sup> During the twentieth century Muslim communities have emerged in Western Europe and North America,<sup>20</sup> many emigrants coming from Lebanon.<sup>21</sup> In the U.K. many Muslims have come from the Indian subcontinent, making the largest non-Christian religious group in that country. In Europe there are ‘guest-workers’ from Turkey, North Africa and the Middle East who have formed Muslim communities. About half the Muslims in the west have been born to immigrant parents, and many seek more visibility than their parents, who tried to blend in.<sup>22</sup> In America many recent immigrant Muslims have entered the professional classes, contrasted to those in Europe who are largely in the working class,<sup>23</sup> although the first Muslims to come to America were taken as slaves from Africa.<sup>24</sup>

The division between the Sunni and Shi’a groups still persists. While the Shi’a account for only about 15% of Muslims, they form the majority in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain and Lebanon. In Iran Shi’i Islam is the state religion.<sup>25</sup> There are also important Shi’a communities in India, Pakistan, the Gulf States and some of the former Russian states, North Yemen and East Africa.

In many ways Sunni and Shi’a Islam are closer in their understanding than many Christian denominations. There are no major differences in daily life, and there is broad consensus on many matters of doctrine and theology.<sup>26</sup>

Shari’a, or holy law, derived from the Qur’an, is foundational to much of Muslim life, both Sunni and Shi’a. How it is interpreted and applied to

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<sup>19</sup> Waines 2001 p.238

<sup>20</sup> Waines 2001 p.239

<sup>21</sup> Momen 1985 p.281

<sup>22</sup> Armstrong 2000 p.150

<sup>23</sup> ibid

<sup>24</sup> Curtis 2009 p.1

<sup>25</sup> Momen 1985 p. xii.

<sup>26</sup> ibid

modern life differs. Sufism, a mystical sect, has adherents from both Sunni and Shi'a. There are many different Shi'a sects, and there is tension within Shi'a such as in Syria, where the regime is dominated by the extremist<sup>27</sup> Alawi sect, considered by many to be heretical.<sup>28</sup> In Kuwait Shi'a, 20% of the population, have protested at being regarded as second-class citizens.<sup>29</sup> It has been suggested that because the Shi'a have usually been in a minority they have been under pressure and therefore less tolerant of diversity than in the larger Sunni group.<sup>30</sup> In 16<sup>th</sup> century Iran the Shi'a Safavid dynasty seized power. They reunified Iran and proclaimed Twelver Shiism to be the state religion.<sup>31</sup> The group Hezbollah comes from Shi'a Islam, and has been synonymous with terrorism since the bombings in 1983 in Beirut. Its members are deeply devoted to Allah, to the point of suicide bombings, and Hezbollah supports their widows and children.<sup>32</sup>

The Sunni side of the divide accounts for the majority of Muslims, but it is not uniform. In Pakistan there are many different sects<sup>33</sup> and conflict is common. Saudi Arabia follows Wahhabism, - the royal family the Saudis is Wahhabi<sup>34</sup> - although they would say that this is not a sect, rather that it is the only true Islam.<sup>35</sup> Ultra-conservative Wahhabi Islam is gaining ground in India<sup>36</sup> with many visiting preachers spreading the teaching. It has long been a factor of northern Pakistan, into Baluchistan and Afghanistan,<sup>37</sup> and much

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<sup>27</sup> Lewis 2009 p.64

<sup>28</sup> Momen 1985 p.269

<sup>29</sup> Momen 1985 p.275

<sup>30</sup> Lewis 2009 p.63

<sup>31</sup> Lewis 2009 p.65

<sup>32</sup> Jaber 1997 p.161

<sup>33</sup> Khan p.1

<sup>34</sup> Allen 2006 240

<sup>35</sup> Mahldi 2010

<sup>36</sup> Mishra 2013

<sup>37</sup> Allen 2006 p.11

of Central Asia.<sup>38</sup> Wahhabi have been blamed for intolerance in Indonesia, but this is only a part of the picture.<sup>39</sup> Part of Wahhabism's conservative mode is based on a strict interpretation of the Shari'a law, a medieval legal code which is based on Qur'anic teachings.<sup>40</sup> Britain, where there is a large Muslim population, has allowed eighty-five Shari'a courts to recommend resolutions to disputes,<sup>41</sup> with widespread opposition.

When many people in the west think of Islam, the word *jihad* comes to mind. Jihad is a sort of holy war, but the original meaning is struggle – a struggle to follow Allah. But since 9/11, and leading to it too, global jihad has meant an “international movement which seeks to bring about Islamic revival by forcing the Islamic and non-Islamic worlds into violent confrontation.”<sup>42</sup> New fundamentalists have distorted the original meaning, resulting in many intra-Muslim conflicts, notably in central Asia.<sup>43</sup> For example “The primary objective for this declaration of Jihad[against the government of Uzbekistan] is the establishment of an Islamic state with the application of the Sharia, founded upon the Koran and the Noble Prophetic sunnah.”<sup>44</sup>

Wahhabi have been active in political and religious arenas in Muslim countries other than Saudi Arabia – “with the establishment of socialist governments in Muslim countries such as that of president Nasser in neighbouring Egypt, the need to counter the spread of irreligious forces now became a priority. The founding Committee of the Muslim Word League, the Supreme Committee for Islamic Propagation, the World Supreme Council

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<sup>38</sup> Rashid 2002 p.ix

<sup>39</sup> Sagita 2012

<sup>40</sup> Waines 2001 p.253

<sup>41</sup> sharia law in the u.k.-e-petitions 2013

<sup>42</sup> Allen 2006 xi

<sup>43</sup> Rashid 2002 x

<sup>44</sup> Head of the Religious Leadership of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Az Zubayr Ibn 'Abdur Raheem 4<sup>th</sup> Jumadi Al Awwal (al) 25 August 1999 in Rashid 2002 p.248

for Mosques and other religious bodies were set up specifically to promote Wahhabism.”<sup>45</sup> They had little power due to lack of resources until the price of oil rose sharply in 1973. Another group within Sunni Islam is the Pan-Arab Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt in 1928. It combines political activism with Islamic charity work.<sup>46</sup> It is known for engaging in violence, claiming responsibility for setting up Hamas, called by some a “moderate Islamism” party<sup>47</sup> and by others radical and extremely violent Islamists.<sup>48</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood is funded by its members, including those in oil-rich Saudi Arabia and is responsible for Islamic fundamentalism in the West Bank and Gaza. Hamas is known for indoctrinating its children with the idea of jihad, having kindergarten children enacting scenes of warfare.<sup>49</sup>

In the 1970s with roots in both Wahhabism and the “revolutionary anti-imperialist ideology”<sup>50</sup> of the Muslim Brotherhood was a young man closely related to the Saudi royal family – Osama bin Laden. He was unofficial ambassador<sup>51</sup> for Saudi Arabia in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and he ensured that passionate jihadists were where they were most needed.<sup>52</sup> To cut a long story short, “the seed of international jihad was planted in the now fertile and receptive soil of the North-West frontier, to be fertilized by all the resentments real and perceived of fundamentalist, revivalist Islam, watered by Osama bin Laden’s pipeline to Saudi Arabia and, finally, to take root as *Al-Qaeda* – the [Military] Base.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Allen 2006 p.258

<sup>46</sup> wiki

<sup>47</sup> Kepel 2004 p.370

<sup>48</sup> Milton-Edwards 2010 p.1

<sup>49</sup> Intelligence and terrorism Information Centre at the Israel Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Centre June 6, 2007

<sup>50</sup> Allen 2006 p.280

<sup>51</sup> Allen 2006 p.281

<sup>52</sup> Possibly with arms from the CIA to wage war against the Soviets.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CIA%E2%80%93al-Qaeda\\_controversy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CIA%E2%80%93al-Qaeda_controversy) accessed 26 September 2013

<sup>53</sup> Allen 2006 p. 282

### **Part 3: Other countries in their political interactions with Islam**

We have seen so far that there are many conflicts between various groups within Islam – the Sunni and Shi’a, and the moderates versus fundamentalist Islamists, who want an Islamic state and strict Shari’a, and would wage jihad against those who oppose them.

But it’s easy to think, “Well, it’s their problem, let them fight it out, it’s not a problem for us here in New Zealand”.

It’s a bit like the old limerick:

*There once were two cats of Kilkenny,  
Each thought there was one cat too many.  
So they fought and they fit,  
They scratched and they bit,  
Till excepting their nails and the tips of their tails,  
Instead of two cats there weren’t any!*

What is becoming obvious is that it’s not just the local Muslim people who are involved in these conflicts. Neighbouring countries have always taken an interest in the affairs of next door, especially if it seems that there may be some advantage to them in supporting one side or the other. The British have had a policy in the Middle East for many years. The French took exception to British support for Prince Faisal being proclaimed ruler of Syria in 1920<sup>54</sup> and kicked him out. The British ‘allowed’ his brother to set up the emirate of

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<sup>54</sup> Allen 2006 p.252

Trans-Jordan.<sup>55</sup> It is understandable that many countries felt the need to have a say in the area as it was the gateway to the Suez Canal and access to the Persian Gulf. In modern times oil pipelines are also part of the picture.

We have already seen how Saudi influences have spread throughout other Muslim countries, and this continues with Saudi support of rebels and guerilla warfare in the Sahel and Syria. There has also been support of Muslim struggle from outside. The Eisenhower administration in the 1950s encouraged links with the Muslim Brotherhood, and more recently the U.S. has supported the Brotherhood in its struggle in Egypt.<sup>56</sup> The U.S. Military has a department known as AFRICOM, which is “about preserving the free flow of natural resources from Africa to the global market,”<sup>57</sup> and this group led the invasion of Libya under the guise of regime-change. But why?

In his book *America and Political Islam: Clash of Cultures or Clash of Interests?* Fawaz Gerges states: “At times, the U.S. foreign-policy elite has cloaked the balancing of power behind an idealistic façade and has used the democratic rhetoric as mere window dressing; democratic ideals were sacrificed at the altar of realpolitik calculations of self-interest.

Interventionist policies have also been justified in terms of making the world “safe for democracy.” ”<sup>58</sup> Retired U.S. Army four-star general, and former NATO Supreme Commander in Europe Wesley Clark gave a talk in 2007, after the publication of his book *A time to Lead: For Duty, Honor and Country*. He stated that the U.S. had provoked the Shi’a uprising of 1991 in Iran, thereby discovering that the then Soviet Union would not intervene. The aim was to “to replace all Soviet client regimes before another strong

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<sup>55</sup> ibid

<sup>56</sup> Gordon 2011

<sup>57</sup> General Ham in Weiler 2013

<sup>58</sup> Gerges 1999 p.5,6

power arises.”<sup>59</sup> A group named *Project for a New American Century* was behind these geopolitical moves and Clark names three highly influential members –Paul Wolfowitz, Dick Cheney, and Donald Rumsfeld. He asserts that there was a plan to destabilize the Middle East. After 9/11 Clark asked why Iraq was being targeted, to be met with the reply that the General in charge didn’t know, and that they could not tie Saddam Hussein to 9/11. Clark also saw a memo from the Secretary of Defence that the U.S. planned to take out seven countries in five years – Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Iran. Again, we ask, Why? The website for *Project for a New American Century* states some of its aims: “ we need to strengthen our ties to democratic allies and to challenge regimes hostile to our interests and values.”<sup>60</sup> It has been suggested that the U.S.’s “aggressive foreign policy... is a necessity of the way in which the U.S. economy is organized and operates.”<sup>61</sup> The U.S. has supported jihad in Afghanistan and Pakistan, supplying text books for schools. The U.S. aimed to stir up Islamic fervour to fight communism, and the books contained anti-Soviet passages amid religious teaching. : Here are some examples of maths problems:

*If out of 10 atheists, 5 are killed by 1 Muslim, 5 would be left.  
5 guns + 5 guns = 10 guns - 15 bullets – 10 bullets = 5 bullets*<sup>62</sup>

These materials served to forge a ‘warrior society’, to promote U.S. military, Anti-Soviet interests. Fortunately for the innocent children who were exposed to the violent images of the material, these have now been made more age-appropriate.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Clark 2007

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.newamericancentury.org/> accessed 23 September 2013

<sup>61</sup> Gowans 2004

<sup>62</sup> <http://supportdanielboyd.wordpress.com/jihad-and-misconceptions/>

<sup>63</sup> *ibid*

At the time of writing there is a civil war in Syria. Again, we can ask, why does the U.S. seek to intervene? It has been suggested that it is Israel that directs U.S. policy in regard to Syria. <sup>64</sup> Syrian President Assad is allied with Israel's foe Hezbollah. Think-tanks in Washington are funded by billionaire benefactors of Israel. <sup>65</sup> However publicly suggesting a pro-Israel agenda leads to being labeled as anti-Semitic. The *Project for the New American Century* actively promotes such a pro-Israel agenda. "Their general line is that U.S. and Israeli interests are identical, and that U.S. world domination is good, or even necessary, for Israel. Such close identification with Israel has caused the United States to be intensely hated throughout the Muslim world, which is not good for the United States in the long run." <sup>66</sup>

A former Israeli consul general in New York says that this is a situation which they need both teams to lose - "Let them both bleed, hemorrhage to death: that's the strategic thinking here. As long as this lingers, there's no real threat from Syria."<sup>67</sup> (And its ally Iran.) We are back to *The Cats of Kilkenny*.

#### **Part 4: Why this matters to us as Christians in New Zealand**

For many years we have seen conflict in Muslim countries on the other side of the world. But how about here in New Zealand? Why do these issues matter? Islam is one of the religions followed in N.Z. There is an increasing number of Muslims living in New Zealand. The 2006 census indicated that "the country's Muslim population was between 35,000 and 40,000, an increase of fifty percent since 2001." <sup>68</sup> Some of these have come in as

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<sup>64</sup> Bricmont 2013

<sup>65</sup> "such as Haim Saban (founder of the Saban Center at the Brookings Institution)" *ibid*

<sup>66</sup> *ibid*

<sup>67</sup> *ibid*

<sup>68</sup> Westra 2009 p. 9

refugees from Bosnia, the Gulf War and Somalia, some as immigrants, some are born here, and some are converts, or reverts, as Muslims have it. There is a wider visibility of Islam here, with local schoolgirls wearing head scarves, and if we go to Newtown, for example, there are many people in traditional Muslim dress, partly religious and partly cultural. The shops in Newtown recently offered Ramadan specials, and halal meat and meat products are widely available. In order to export meat to Muslim countries, N.Z. has to ensure that it is halal-certified. The Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand (FIAN.Z.) which has members from over forty countries<sup>69</sup> is responsible for certifying 80% of halal meat and has a wide educational role. The majority of N.Z.'s Muslim settlers are from Asian countries<sup>70</sup> as are the bulk of world Muslims. Fijian-Indian backgrounds are common here. Riyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, a fourth generation Indo-Fijian, has said:

Islam is one of the most misunderstood religions in the world. What do people know about Islam? Hardly anything.... Muslims all over the world have the responsibility to be more proactive... We should be constantly trying to educate people about Islam before something happens.<sup>71</sup>

Does the global move towards Islamism affect New Zealand? A local Islamic charity recently applied to set up an Islamic school to teach Wahhabism and to set up an Islamic bank in Christchurch. Other Muslim community leaders wrote to the government warning that granting such an application would be a disaster, owing to the al-Qaeda links of the group. An article in Investigate

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<sup>69</sup> Westra 2009 p.36

<sup>70</sup> Westra 2009 p.7

<sup>71</sup> Westra 2009 p.18

magazine has details<sup>72</sup> but has been widely criticised for its inflammatory language.<sup>73</sup> Another way that Islam is growing in New Zealand is with some Maori reverting to Islam, with a Maori, Te Amorangi Izhad Kireka-Whaanga being named among the 500 most influential Muslims in the world.<sup>74</sup> Some of his converts are in the prisons, and follow a ‘militant, politicized brand of Islam’ which is raising concerns among the wider Muslim community.<sup>75</sup> There is difference and tension within Islam in New Zealand.

Why does this matter? First, we cannot plead isolation. New Zealand is part of a global movement. There are two major difficulties. The first is that of a radical Islam which condones violence. But in my mind the more important issue is the international exploitation of this - the differences between Sunni and Shi’a have been inflamed by the U.S. in Iran as we saw above, and the West has a particular agenda for these Middle-Eastern countries that has nothing to do with upholding the rights of the citizens of those countries. If Christian New Zealanders are to be people of integrity, we must speak out against any moves of our government to support regimes such as the U.S., the U.K. and France which would seek to use religious tensions in the Middle East and Africa as an excuse to act militarily in those countries. The news reports we see here are very brief and only tell part of the story. There is more information available online but it can be hard to determine where the truth lies. If the church is to stand up for the vulnerable, surely the ordinary inhabitants of these countries must be our first concern. The U.S. would act as the world’s policeman in the name of ‘saving’ these people, but if we as a country which upholds human rights want to help those whose

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<sup>72</sup> Wishart 2007

<sup>73</sup> DigitalMaori 2010 accessed 20 September 2013

<sup>74</sup> *ibid*

<sup>75</sup> Hume 2004

rights are few and far between, it is vital to be wise and careful before committing New Zealand to support the U.S.'s agenda.

The bulk of Islam is not fundamentalist, extremist or terrorists. Some are revivalist, going back to the tenets of the Qur'an. Muslim modernists "reaffirm and reevaluate the significance of all these [traditional] principles for modern life; they view the Qur'an as God's supreme revelation and believe that it calls for human progress."<sup>76</sup> I will finish by quoting the Fatihah, or 'opening' chapter, which is recited often and regarded as a summary of the message of the Qur'an.

*In the name of God, the Merciful, the compassionate*

*Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being,*

*The All-merciful, the All-compassionate,*

*The master of the Day of Doom.*

*Thee only we serve; to Thee alone we pray for succour.*

*Guide us in the straight path,*

*The path of those whom Thou hast blessed,*

*Not of those against whom Thou art wrathful,*

*Nor of those who are astray.<sup>77</sup>*

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>76</sup> Armajani 2004 pp.12,13

<sup>77</sup> The Qur'an in Van der Krogt 1990 p.193

Today we have gone on a journey, back in time to the beginnings of Islam. We have journeyed around the world to exotic countries that we hear about on our news reports, usually because of terrible violence happening there. We have looked at some of the issues leading to that violence, and how other countries are exploiting and even fueling conflict. Finally, I have challenged you to consider our response as New Zealanders and as Christians. This has been a very brief introduction to what is a huge and fascinating topic, and I would invite you to follow up with some of the resources I have listed. All the books except one are available in the Wellington Public Library, and various websites are there too.

There is a handout of questions to consider in your home groups too, and I wish you well with your exploring!

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**Islam, Politics and why it matters for us.  
Questions for discussion in home groups**

Part 1: History of Islam.

Did you know any of the background of Islam?

Do you want to find out more?

Does it answer some of your questions, or leave you with more? What questions?

How did you feel about the message to Muhammad, that Allah demanded that everyone treat each other with justice, equity and compassion? Does it sound familiar?

Can you find similarities to the Hebrew Scriptures? Differences?

Part 2: The Spread of Islam

What surprised you in this brief history?

Did you recognize any of the terms, like sunna, Khalifa, Shari'a, Imam? Others?

Were you aware of the current widespread nature of the Muslim world, the umma?

Do you have a better understanding of the reason for the divide between Sunni and Shi'a Islam?

Does it resonate with you in terms of your history? Is it like the Catholic/Protestant conflicts in Christianity? Or not? Do you know what it feels like to be hated because of your religious adherence?

What does the word jihad stir up?

Part 3: Other countries in their political interactions with Islam.

Is it just a problem for two local warring factions to solve? Should we leave them to it until there is no one left?

Do you know of other countries getting involved with these conflicts? Think back to the Balkan wars, etc.

What was your reaction to the involvement of the U.S. in Islamic countries?

How about a supposed pro-Israel stance?

Part 4: Why this matters to us as Christians in N.Z.

Does this matter?

Are we really called as Christians to uphold the truth? Think of scripture that would support/challenge this view.

Do you know any Muslim people in your community? Do you have discussions about religion with them or anyone else?

What are our responsibilities as N.Z. citizens?

How did you react to hearing an extract from the Qur'an? Do you have a theological position about the God we worship as Christians, and Allah? Are they the same? Or not?

Why?