

Regent College

Matt Jones

March 21st, 2005

INDS 530: World Religions

John Stackhouse

Word Count: 2012

Book Review

Understanding Islam: An Introduction to the Muslim World

Thomas W. Lippman

Lippman, Thomas W. *Understanding Islam: An Introduction to the Muslim World, Second Revised Edition*. New York: Penguin, 1995.

In his short introduction to Islam, Lippman has attempted to “give a brief account of who the Muslims are, what their faith teaches, and what their world is like...”¹ The title *Understanding Islam* needs the subtitle, *An Introduction to the Muslim World*, as it would be nearly impossible to exposit all of Islam in a single book, Lippman has limited his book to a brief introduction that aims to give reader a broader understanding of what it means to live in the Muslim world and follow the religion of Islam. Lippman seems to be writing over and against the common view in the West that often sees Islam as a violent religion characterized by *jihad* (which is often under-translated²). Lippman aims to provide a broader understanding that the surface level lacks. While he can’t go too deep into specifics in this introduction, a broader knowledge of Muslim belief, practice, history, foundation, and culture is a good place to start.

This introduction is setup to cover the broadest themes possible (in seven chapters) with subsections that give more detail in certain areas. Since many don’t understand Islam at all, a good place for Lippman to start is with a chapter on the main beliefs and practices of Islam. There are five main ideas that govern Muslim faith: the five Pillars. Lippman gives a brief subsection to each one. The *shahada* is the first and is probably most standardized pillar³. The *shahada* is the profession of faith that “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God.” Islam is a strict monotheism and worshiping anyone or anything other than Allah is an unforgivable sin.⁴ Judaism and Christianity are looked at as being related (while misguided) in faith and are called the “People of the Book”. While Muhammad is not given special status, he is held with high regard as the founder of Islam. “Islam teaches that

¹ Lippman x.

² Under-translated in that the typical translation is “holy war” which can be true, but the fuller meaning (“utmost effort”) is better articulated thusly: “*Jihad* does not mean fighting a war; it means to struggle for what is required of one in obedience to God.” (Khalil Abdel Alim quoted in Lippman 113).

³ The other pillars are agreed upon but their details and practice are not.

⁴ Lippman 8.

Muhammad's mission was twofold: to bring knowledge of the one God and His book of truth to the Arabians, a pagan people who had no scripture and hence no knowledge of divine truth, and to correct the errors and falsehoods into which earlier 'people of the book' – Jews and Christians – had fallen.”⁵ The second pillar is ritual prayer. Prayers are standardized: what to say (including the *shahada*), which direction to face (towards the Kaaba), and which positions to hold are quite specific.⁶ This section also talks about the mosques where formal prayers are held. The third pillar is the *zakat* or “alms-tax” which is a mandatory donation to help the needy.⁷ The fourth pillar is a month long fast (Ramadan). During Ramadan, between sunrise and, Muslims are to fast from food, drink, and sexual intercourse and are encouraged to pray at the mosque.⁸ The final pillar is the pilgrimage to Mecca, the *hajj*. This is a command that Muslims are obliged to fulfill once in their lifetime. There is much ceremony and ritual associated with this pilgrimage that commemorates “Abraham's obedience to God's command to sacrifice his son Ishmael, God's compassion in sparing Ishmael, the expulsion of both Hagar and Ishmael from the community of the Hebrews ... and God's mercy in caring for them in their exile.”⁹ The *hajj* has many social implications for the individual as well as the community: it is a unifying force within a very diverse religion. Lippman goes on to say that the “five pillars of the faith...encompass the fundamental beliefs and practices common to all Muslims, but they do not represent a comprehensive list of the spiritual duties, standards of conduct, beliefs, and attitudes that are required of a good Muslim.”¹⁰

⁵ *Ibid* 9.

⁶ *Ibid* 13.

⁷ Although in practice *zakat* is voluntary as the Koran doesn't prescribe how much should be donated.

⁸ Lippman 20.

⁹ *Ibid* 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid* 30.

In order to flesh out what else is required of a “good Muslim”, Lippman discusses the Prophet Muhammad as Muhammad is the example by which Muslims try to live their lives by. As the *shahada* suggests, Muhammad is not to be worshipped, but he should be followed (and many believe that he was nearly perfect). The Koran says that Muhammad was illiterate which supports the claim that the Koran contains the words of God, and not Muhammad.¹¹ Lippman talks about Muhammad’s migration to Medina in order to form a stable base of followers and stated that “Islam was the source of temporal as well as spiritual authority, and ... that faith, rather than tribe, should be the bond that regulates the affairs of men.”¹² Lippman also discusses early political and military motivations for Muhammad as well as his character.

The third chapter follows from the discussion of Muhammad to the book that was transmitted through him, the Koran. “The Koran purports to be the successor and continuation of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, incorporating their teachings in a new revelation that gave the people of Arabia an enlightenment previously accorded only to the Jews and Christians.”¹³ The text itself was not compiled in Muhammad’s life but rather brought together through oral tradition and completed in the mid 7th century. The book is arranged not chronologically, but by length of the chapter or *sura*. There are commentaries that are considered to be secondary sources compared to the Koran itself but offer wisdom as “the first commentator is said to have been the Prophet himself.”¹⁴

With the basic tenants and foundation of Islam stated, Lippman then discusses law and government that arise out of that context. Muslims do not see any distinction between church and state. Belief is what governs the laws that are written. “*Sharia* is the code of law based on

¹¹ *Ibid* 37.

¹² *Ibid* 45.

¹³ *Ibid* 57.

¹⁴ *Ibid* 68.

religious principles that regulates the conduct of all Muslims, a code that covers social, commercial, domestic, criminal, and political affairs as well as devotional practices.”¹⁵ The content and amount of a government’s code that is based upon *sharia* will vary from country to country. There are other sources of law¹⁶ but they are secondary.¹⁷ Lippman also discusses how *sharia* influences culture and contemporary society. The role of the Caliph¹⁸ was also used to help govern the society.

With a basis for forming law established, the advancement of Islam naturally followed. Islam spread rapidly from North Africa to Mesopotamia to Central Asia. It was spread through conquest as well as cultural assimilation. There were a number of different Caliphs with a range of success. *Jihad* was also a concept that helped spread Islam.¹⁹ It is also interesting to note that “the conquered peoples grew restive not because they were forced to accept Islam but because the Arab Muslims were slow to accept into the faith those who wanted to join and because when they had embraced Islam, the Arabs still looked down on them.”²⁰ The conversion didn’t usually come by force (as is often assumed). There were also many changes in power from the Umayyad caliphs, to the Abbasids, to the loss of power with the Mongol invasion: turmoil and power struggles were common.

The power struggles internal to Islam brought about different sects. Lippman discusses the main divisions. The majority of Muslims are Sunni from *sunna*, the “path” or “way” of the Prophet²¹ and followed the rule of the caliphate. The largest sect is the Shiites who follow authority through the line of Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law. There are also more profound

¹⁵ *Ibid* 71.

¹⁶ *ijma*, “consensus” and *qiyas*, “reasoning by analogy”

¹⁷ Lippman 81.

¹⁸ The successor to the temporal power of Muhammad, *Ibid* 104.

¹⁹ See footnote 2.

²⁰ Lippman 116.

²¹ *Ibid* 137.

differences in how a Sunni or Shiite will practice their religion. The other largest sects that Lippman address are the Sufis (mystics who “espouse a personal relationship with God based on love, in contrast to the submission based on fear and prohibition that characterizes the official religion.”²²), Wahhabis (an Islamic form of Puritanism²³ which makes up much of Saudi Arabia), the Druze (reclusives that believe Darazi, a Caliph of Egypt, was the last incarnation of the Deity), the Alawites (an obscure sect that rule Syria²⁴), and the Muslim Brotherhood (which seems to be more of a political organization than a religions group²⁵).

Lippman’s final section turns to the Islamic community today as culmination of all he has discussed to this point. “For individual Muslims, the challenge of contemporary life has been to balance the demands of their faith... with the inevitability of material and social change.”²⁶ The diversity of the Muslim people creates conflict in many areas of life, but there is always the faith behind them. All Muslims have had to deal with modernization. “Each country makes different decisions about what forms of development and social change are acceptable, the decisions must be seen as justifiable in Islam if they are to win popular acceptance.”²⁷ The thing that holds the differences together is their faith.

Overall Lippman was able to do what he aimed to do. He covered all the basics very well and did open up the Islamic world. After reading the book it would be difficult to portray Islam as any one particular belief. Lippman showed how rich the faith was and what it was founded on. There are also many things that were left out. That is not necessarily a negative point but could just be a reflection on the nature of an introductory book. Lippman did a good job of

²² *Ibid* 146.

²³ *Ibid* 149.

²⁴ *Ibid* 155.

²⁵ *Ibid* 157.

²⁶ *Ibid* 167.

²⁷ *Ibid* 173.

showing good and bad things about certain specific aspects (like the different sects and the spread of Islam) but didn't seem to offer much comment on how Muslims have dealt with apologetical challenges to their faith (such as issues surrounding the compilation of the Koran and its divine status). That being said, Lippman's introduction summarized Islamic belief and the Muslim world quite well.

One thing that impressed me positively was Lippman's desire to broaden the West's view of Islam. Especially after 9/11, the need for this is important. It is easy to want to characterize Muslims as violent people only interested in *jihad*. Lippman's personal experiences, both good and bad, with Muslims around the globe offer a diverse picture of what it means to live as a Muslim.

A second that impressed me positively was his discussion about *jihad*. To know that Muslims want to do what Allah has asked of them in everything they do is important. It made it more personal when Lippman said "Getting out of bed for dawn prayer, he [Khalil Abdel Alim] said, is *jihad*."²⁸ This helped bring ground level faith and an unknown world closer to what I might profess in my own faith.

One thing that impressed me negatively was the lack of negative criticism relating to Islam as a whole. Whenever critiquing a people or group I think it is important to see both the good and bad things about them, it is what makes them human. Lippman does offer some negative critique about the individual sects, but not about the group as a whole. To me, not addressing issues that Muslim people deal with regarding negative aspects of their religion is either being naïve or biased.

A second thing that impressed me negatively was Lippman's lack of discussion about how modern Muslims deal with such a diversity of views and political powers and struggles. If

²⁸ *Ibid* 113.

the Koran is fact and Muhammad was the example by which to live, it doesn't seem like there would be so much division as the Koran says there shouldn't be. Modern scholars and theologians must address this issue, but Lippman doesn't discuss it at all.