

World Religions

Week 3: Islam

Identity

Along with Christianity and Judaism, Islam is one of three monotheistic world religions. The Arabic word Islam (derived from a Semitic root meaning “peace”) expresses entry into peace and security with God (Allah) through submission or surrender of one’s whole life to his will. An adherent of Islam is properly identified by the term Muslim.

History

Muhammad was born in Mecca on the Arabian Peninsula about the year 570 AD. Orphaned at six, he was raised by family members. Pagan religions, in which many gods were worshiped (especially sun, moon, and star gods), dominated the spiritual life of the region. Later Muslims referred to this period prior to Muhammad, regarded as immoral, as a time of darkness. Because of some Christian and Jewish settlements that were scattered throughout Arabia, and due to caravan routes that passed through Mecca, Muhammad came into contact with Christian and Jewish teachings that would later find their way into the Qur’ān—though often, from a Christian and Jewish perspective, in distorted form.

At the age of 40, while retreating into a cave outside Mecca for an extended period of meditation, Muhammad claimed that the angel Gabriel visited him and issued the call to be Allah’s prophet. The revelations continued until Muhammad’s death in 632 A.D. and would eventually be recorded in the Qur’ān (a word that literally means the “reading” or the “reciting”). Upon receiving these revelations, Muhammad began to preach the message received in them. They are summed up in the shahādah, the simple confession of faith that is the first of the Five Pillars of Islam (see below): “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the prophet of Allah.” By such preaching Muhammad narrowed the focus of the Arab world from many gods to one god, Allah. However, his preaching of monotheism in the face of pagan idolatry also included a call to repentance from pagan immorality.

For several years Muhammad met great opposition to his message. Finally, leaders of the town of Yathrib, where some of his followers had already settled, invited him to live there. The town was later renamed Medina, the “city of the prophet,” to honor him. His flight from Mecca and his arrival in Medina took place in 622 A.D. and would become known as the hijra— an event marking the beginning of the Muslim calendar. Over the next few years, Muhammad and his followers began to plunder rich caravans and to conquer one small town after another. This accumulation of wealth and power enabled Muhammad to return in conquest to Mecca in 630 A.D. and to bring almost all of Arabia under submission to the religion of Islam by the time of his death in 632 A.D. Over the next one hundred years, Islam as a religion and as a political and cultural force extended from the western edges of India and China across Persia, Arabia, Egypt, and North Africa to the Atlantic. The defeat of Muslim armies at Tours, France, in 732 A.D. prevented any further movement into Europe, although the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century spread Islam into Turkey, southern Russia, and reached as far as Austria.

Sacred Texts

- *Qur'ān*. The final recording of the revelations given to Muhammad by Gabriel and believed to be the eternal, infallible, and unalterable word of God which Allah first inscribed on a stone tablet in heaven before the creation of the world.³ Portions of the “recitations” of Muhammad’s preaching were recorded by his followers, and others were passed on orally. In the year 650 A.D. under the direction of Caliph Uthman, the Qur’ān was collected into its final form. Said to be written in perfect Arabic, it contains 114 sūrahs (chapters), generally arranged according to length from the longest to the shortest.
- *Hadīth*. “A story or tradition; the sayings and doings of Muhammad that constitute a second source of faith in Islam; also the sayings and doings of the first companions of the Prophet.”⁴ Hadīth became the source of additional instruction for life in the ummah, the community of Islam. Where the Qur’ān does not speak or give directions for a specific life situation the Hadīth is looked to for guidance.
- *Shar’īah*. While not a text as such, the Shar’īah (the Law of Islam) combines the Qur’ān and the Hadīth along with other accumulated laws and codes of ethics as the perfect revelation of God’s will for humankind. In countries where Islam is the dominant religion, all of life is governed by this revelation of God’s will. The Shar’īah binds Muslims into the truly Islamic community, allowing no separation of the sacred from the secular.

Beliefs

The essential practices of Islam are known as The Five Pillars of Islam, which are the religious duties or works of righteousness that constitute the fundamental requirements of Islam for all Muslims.

- *Shahādah*. As noted above, this is the basic confession of faith recited many times daily by the devout Muslim: “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the prophet of Allah.” Anyone of any country, race, or status in society who can consciously and solemnly confess this creed as expressing the truth of what one believes is considered to be a Muslim. The first part of the creed declares that God is one (hence, Islam is monotheistic). Allah is the one Creator, Provider, Ruler, Forgiver, and Judge who alone is worthy of worship as the sole object of a person’s loyalty and devotion. God has created man capable of doing his will and being righteous before him. In confessing that there is no God but Allah, the Muslim also commits himself to doing God’s will as revealed in the Shar’īah.

The second part of the creed sums up the Muslim doctrine of revelation. To confess that Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah is to confess that the verses of the Qur’ān are indeed the very words of Allah whose directives for life are to be strictly followed. Since Muhammad is regarded as the final Prophet of God, the deeds and other sayings from his life (hadīth) are also to be emulated as a guide for living. The shahādah is the foundational confession of Islam. For centuries it has served as a rallying cry to inspire intense devotion to Islam and also as the evangelistic call to other religions to give up what is perceived as idolatry and become part of the perfect community of Islam.

- *Salāt*. Ritual prayer performed five times a day at daybreak, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and before retiring is the second pillar. It is a structured act of worship composed of prescribed

ritual washings and portions of the Qur'ān that are to be recited in Arabic. The first sūrah is always recited. Utmost devotion is required by the Qur'ān: "Guard strictly your (habit) of prayers, especially the Middle Prayer; and stand before Allah in a devout (frame of mind)." Every Friday Muslims are required to perform salāt in a communal setting. This salāt is led by an imam (teacher) who delivers a message that applies Islamic teachings to daily life. The purpose of salāt is self-attunement to the call of God.

- *Zakāt*. Alms-giving (or charity) is the third pillar. The word means "sweetening." Islam regards all wealth as belonging to God. Therefore, the use of one's wealth needs to be made just, worthy, "sweet." Making wealth "sweet" takes place by zakāt, the law that requires every Muslim to share 2 ½% of his total wealth with the Islamic state for distribution to the needy and for the cause of Islam. Muslims may participate in additional alms-giving by voluntarily giving financial support to other causes of their choice. "So establish regular Prayer, give regular Charity, and hold fast to Allah!"
- *Sawm*. Fasting is the fourth pillar. The month of Ramadan, in which Muhammad received his first revelation and call to be the Prophet of Allah, is devoted to daily fasting. Every adult Muslim is required to abstain from food, drink, and sexual intercourse from dawn to sunset each day for the entire month. Temporary exemptions are made for certain life situations. The purpose of the fast is two-fold: to increase one's self-discipline in the service and for the praise of Allah, and to increase compassion for the poor and needy. "Ramadan is the (month) in which was sent down the Qur'ān, as a guide to mankind,... So every one of you who is present (at his home) during that month should spend it in fasting,..."
- *Hājj*. The pilgrimage to Mecca—the fifth pillar—during the first to the twelfth days of the last month of the lunar year is required of every adult Muslim who has earned the wealth needed for the trip, paid zakāt on that wealth, and has taken care of all debts. The pilgrimage includes: a visit to the great mosque, kissing the Black Stone (said to be of meteoric origin), circling the Kabah (building in the center of the great mosque in Mecca) seven times, and progression through various stations for prayer and meditation. The pilgrimage's purpose is to strengthen a Muslim's faith and reaffirm his oneness with all Muslims throughout the world. "Remember We made the House a place of assembly for men and a place of safety; and take ye the Station of Abraham as a place of prayer; and We covenanted with Abraham and Isma'il, that they should sanctify My House for those who compass it round, or use it as a retreat, or bow, or prostrate themselves (therein in Prayer)."
 - *Jihād*. While not one of the five required pillars of Islam, jihād has become a well-known practice of Islam. The word means "striving" or "struggle" and summarizes all of the personal mental, spiritual, and physical striving that a Muslim must do to learn and practice Islam fully. "Only those are Believers who have believed in Allah and His Messenger, and have never since doubted, but have striven with their belongings and their persons in the cause of Allah..." However, in a narrower and more communal sense, jihād is the striving of holy war. Its purpose is to extend Islam into non-Islamic territories or to defend Islam from danger. Jihād is not considered lawful unless it involves the summoning of unbelievers to belief. Those who die in a genuine jihād are considered to be martyrs who have earned special merit that qualifies them to enter paradise directly. "Therefore, when ye meet the Unbelievers (in fight), smite them at their necks... But those who are slain in the way of Allah-- He will never let their deeds be lost. Soon He will guide them and improve their condition, and admit them to the Garden which He has announced for them."

In addition to the five pillars of Islam which describe the basic requirements placed upon every Muslim, certain fundamental beliefs characterize the faith of Islam. These articles of faith revolve around Allah, angels, prophets, holy books, and the day of judgment:

- *Allah*. Islam is a monotheistic religion that teaches there is only one God, Allah, who is described in every sūrah of the Qur'ān except one as the Compassionate and the Merciful. He is the Creator and Sustainer of all life. He is transcendent and his sovereignty and power set him apart from man.
- *Angels*. Angels are viewed as servants or messengers of God. In the hierarchy of angels Gabriel is prominent since he revealed the Qur'ān to Muhammad. Gabriel is, at times, equated with the Holy Spirit. Fun fact: In Islam, Iblīs (Satan) is the angel who was put out of Paradise because, according to Sūrah 7:11-18, he refused Allah's command to the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam, meaning angels aren't just lower than humans, but subservient to them. According to tradition, each Muslim is said to have two recording angels to write down his good deeds and his evil deeds.
- *Prophets*. The prophets are merely human messengers through whom God speaks to mankind. All the prophets are considered to be divinely inspired, but only six are considered to be most eminent and given titles of honor in Islamic literature: Adam, the chosen of Allah; Noah, the preacher of Allah; Abraham, the friend of Allah; Moses, the speaker of Allah; Jesus, the word of Allah; Muhammad, the apostle of Allah. Muhammad is considered the greatest and final prophet to whom was given the perfect and complete revelation of Allah. Therefore, no further word from Allah and no additional prophet are needed.
- *Holy Books*. Muslims accept the tawrāt (Torah) as originally revealed by God to Moses, the zabūr (Psalms) as originally revealed to David, and the injīl (Gospel) as originally revealed to Jesus. However, these three revelations as presently recorded in the Bible are viewed as having become corrupted and no longer reliable for the full truth revealed by Allah. The Qur'ān alone is the final and complete authentic word of God for the present and the future until the Day of Judgment. Where the Qur'ān and the Bible differ in what they teach the Bible is to be rejected and the Qur'ān accepted.
- *Day of Judgment*. The concept of a final Day of Judgment or Day of Reckoning is a central teaching of the Qur'ān. This belief centers on the teaching that while Allah is the Compassionate and the Merciful, he is also the Judge of all mankind. God is aware of man's thoughts and actions, for which a man is responsible to God. Judgment will be based on the balance of evil deeds weighed against good deeds and works of merit such as the faithful performance of the five pillars of Islam.

There are a variety of sects or divisions within Islam, the two largest being Sunni and Shī'a.

- *Sunni*. The largest group of Muslims is the "orthodox" Sunnis who make up 80-85% of all Muslims. The name is derived from the fact that they follow the approved sunnah, or path, of Muhammad as recorded in the Hadith that have been accepted and codified as genuine. They recognize the first four Caliphs (successors of Muhammad), but unlike the Shī'a, they attribute no special religious function to the descendants of Muhammad's son-in-law, Ali. Sunni Muslims are dominant in such countries as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Indonesia.

- *Shī‘a*. Shī‘a make up about 15% of all Muslims. The division between Sunni and Shī‘a goes back to the disagreement over who should succeed Muhammad following his death. The Shī‘a support Ali as the first Caliph and hold that all future Caliphs are descendants from Ali (thus the name Shī‘a, which literally means “followers of Ali”). In Islam, the Imam is the chief teacher in the local community and mosque. However, Shī‘a generally recognize only exceptional teachers as imams. Differences also exist between Sunni and Shī‘a over some doctrines, and over how Islam and its beliefs should be practiced in the modern world. Shī‘a are the dominant Muslim group in Iran, Iraq, and parts of Africa.

Response

In the present pluralistic context, many people may have the mistaken impression that Christians and Muslims worship the same God—especially since Christianity and Islam are both monotheistic religions. They may also think that the religions are more similar than dissimilar in other beliefs and practices. However, the response given below will show, from a Lutheran perspective, the sharp contrast between Christian teaching and the teachings of Islam as found in the Qur’ān. This evaluation will focus on three key doctrinal areas—God, the person of Jesus Christ, and God’s work of salvation in Christ.

God. Lutherans confess the historic Christian teaching that the true God has revealed Himself to be the Triune God, one God but three distinct persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This doctrine is confessed in the historic ecumenical creeds of the Christian faith: Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds. These credal formulas sum up God’s self-revelation in the divinely inspired Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. In these Scriptures God has revealed Himself as the one and only true God (Deut. 6:4; 1 Cor. 8:4) who is three persons in one divine essence: Father (Mal. 2:10; 2 Cor. 1:2-3), Son (Matt. 3:17; John 20:31), and Holy Spirit (Is. 63:10-14; Acts 5:3-4). (See also Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:4; Eph. 4:4-6). Belief in this Triune God, who is love (1 John 4:16), is absolutely necessary for eternal salvation.

Islam teaches that “there is no God but Allah.” In the Qur’ān, Allah has many attributes comparable to the Triune God of Christianity. For example, he is “most compassionate, most merciful,” an attribute mentioned in every sūrah except the ninth. The second sūrah teaches that Allah “heareth and knoweth all things,” and that he is “oft-forgiving.” He has “power over all things.” However, no Muslim would ever accept the biblical teaching that God is love. Since Allah is totally transcendent, he has no need for another, and so it can never be said of God that he loved the world and gave his Son to die for it. In fact it is impossible, according to the Qur’ān, for God to have a Son. Therefore, there can be no Triune God. Lutherans hold that Islam misunderstands the doctrine of the Trinity when it concludes, and expressly so, that Christians believe in three gods.

Jesus Christ. Islam’s rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity is also seen in what it teaches concerning the person of Jesus Christ. In the words of Martin Luther, Lutherans confess the Christian doctrine that Jesus Christ “true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord.” This confession is based on the clear teaching of the Bible that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” (John 20:31; Matt. 16:16), to whom is ascribed the attributes of God such as all-knowing (John 21:17) and almighty (Matt. 28:18). Further, the Bible clearly teaches that Jesus is also fully human (1 Tim. 2:5) with a human body (Luke 24:39) and human needs (Matt. 4:2) and emotions (John 11:35). Jesus is both God and man in one person.

The Qur'ān, however, teaches that while Jesus is to be respected as one of Allah's prophets, He was nothing more than one of many human messengers of Allah. "O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion: nor say of Allah aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) a Messenger of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in Allah and His Messengers. Say not 'Trinity': desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is One God: Glory be to Him: (far Exalted is He) above having a son." To teach that Jesus Christ is "true God, begotten of the Father in eternity" is, according to Islam, to speak blasphemy against Allah.

Salvation. Lutherans confess the biblical teaching that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23) and that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). All people through Adam have inherited and are born with a sinful condition (Rom. 5:12, 19a). This sinful condition manifests itself in sinful thoughts, words, and deeds (Matt. 15:19). Human sin separates people from God (Is. 59:2), placing them under God's judgment and condemnation (Jer. 25:31; John 5:29; Rom. 1:18-32; 3:9-20; 5:16). But God is love and He desires that all people be saved from sin and come to a knowledge of the truth revealed in Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:4). This truth is that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting peoples' sins against them (2 Cor. 5:19). Such reconciliation to God (salvation) is possible because Jesus Christ by His death on the cross made the "atoning sacrifice" for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). He made peace between God and man "through His blood shed on the cross" (Col. 1:20; see Rom. 3:25). Further, Jesus' resurrection from the dead showed Him to be the Son of God (Rom. 1:4) and demonstrated His victory over sin and its wage, namely, death (1 Cor. 15:12-22). Sinners are thus declared to be righteous before God (that is, they are justified) through faith in Jesus Christ. That is, they are given eternal life in heaven not because of any merit or work on their part but only by the grace (undeserved mercy) of God received through faith in (trusting) Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord (Eph. 2:8-9; Gal. 2:15-19; John 6:40).

It is evident that the teaching of Islam is incompatible with the Christian doctrine of salvation. According to the Qur'ān, Jesus is not God, nor is He the Son of God. Thus, according to this understanding whatever He accomplished in this life could certainly not atone for the sins of the world, in the Christian perspective. In fact, the Qur'ān even goes so far as to deny that Jesus' died by crucifixion on a cross: "That they said (in boast) 'We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah'--but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them ...for of a surety they killed him not--nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself..."

Islam does not have a concept of original sin as revealed in the Bible. Islam admits that people are inclined to sin and disobey God. But Islam also claims that people are naturally capable of obedience that merits God's favor. The Muslim's hope for the reward of an afterlife in heaven depends on tipping the scales of judgment in his favor (see note 15): "Then when the Trumpet is blown, ... those whose balance (of good deeds) is heavy--they will attain salvation: but those whose balance is light, will be those who have lost their souls; in Hell they will abide." Thus, Islam teaches a righteousness before God based on human merit, on a striving to please Allah by believing Islam's fundamental beliefs and by practicing the daily, annual, and once-in-a-lifetime requirements of the five Pillars of Islam. We may note, for example, the following statements: "But it is righteousness--to believe in Allah and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers; to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin,...; to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity,..." "But those who believe and work deeds of righteousness, and believe in the (Revelation) sent down to Muhammad--for it is the Truth from their Lord- -He will remove from them their ills and improve their condition."

Talking Points

Understanding Submission

Though we often don't hear that word "submission" in our daily Christian vocabulary, we do hear a lot about "obedience". The connotation of those two words may be slightly different (with vs. without choice), but the root meaning remains the same. Christians are called to be obedient even to the point of death (Revelation 2:10) in the same way that Muslims are called to submit themselves to Allah even unto death. The difference lies in where salvation comes from. For Christians it's through Jesus. For Muslims, obedience to their law. So while we're called to the same thing, it often looks different when comparing the religions.

So how do we make a point of connection? When talking to a Muslim, 1) be respectful of their choices to follow their laws and customs (i.e. don't try to feed them pork or stop them from praying), but also 2) show your appreciation of their willingness to sacrifice of themselves for something greater. When someone wears certain clothing because of ritual law, don't look at them strangely, tell them what you like about it. When someone is abstaining from certain foods (especially during the month of Ramadan), compliment the strength that's required to carry out such a task.

You can send the message that you are impressed by their zeal and obedience because you know just how hard it is to do yourself. It becomes a great conversational tool if they ask, "Are you a Muslim" and you can respond "No, I'm a Christian", but then instead of talking about Jesus, talk about the importance of being obedient to God and making the hard choices. Best case scenario: You come to a point of talking about faith and get to talk about Jesus. Worst case scenario: You begin to form a mutual respect for one another which forms a relationship where there's a bit of give and take. Respect is a powerful tool that holds relationships together even when conversations turn south.

Utilizing Prayer

Prayer is a HUGE part of the Islamic faith. Prayer isn't just a choice, it's a basic necessity of faith, just as air is a necessity of life. And despite Christians not having the best track record of praying as often as they should, constant prayer is a tenet of our faith as well. Prayer is the open line of communication from created to creator. And any Christian and Muslim should build their life with prayer as the mortar holding the bricks of life's circumstances together.

So how can we use prayer to connect? Here is where action can speak louder than words when it comes to connecting with a Muslim. It's easy for Muslims to look at Christians who don't pray and think to themselves "they're not even faithful to their own faith", but exemplifying a lifestyle where you are not afraid or embarrassed to pray in front of anyone again brings about a mutual respect. Many of the religions we're going to talk about in the coming weeks see few things as mandatory. Even Judaism has many splits of beliefs and philosophies because their faith revolves around a Messiah who hasn't yet come, and therefore some even believe he's not a real person. But the Jesus of Christianity and Muhammad of Islam exemplify a concrete example to follow.

Because we both have such a strong, tangible leader, the tenets of our faiths are much more set in stone, and honoring those tenets is more critical. Being open and transparent that prayer to God supersedes our own wants sends a message that faith isn't a joke to us. Faith is above everything else in life. And like with respecting Islamic submission, exemplifying prayer creates this air of understanding between two people because they have experienced similar hardships when dealing with the world and choices.

Conclusion

These two talking points are specific ways to address two things: word and action. In practice, despite different beliefs, Christians are actually closer to Muslims than any other world religion, including *modern day* Judaism. And using words and actions that remind them of that helps build relationships through solidarity.

In countries outside the United States, this would be a harder task, but because both Christians and Muslims have had to deal with anti-religious struggles in various ways in this country, it's much easier to bond over the importance of faith, even if it's not the same faith.