

Christianity vs. Islam – Lesson 4

How can Christians be Sensitive to Muslim/Islamic Culture?

Knowing and understanding Muslims can go a long way to breaking down cultural barriers and dispelling myths about Islamic culture and beliefs. Note, while the below principles apply to most Muslims, in no sense do they apply to all Muslims.

Christians can develop genuine friendships with Muslims based upon mutual respect and interests. Some examples of extending friendship to Muslims include attending cultural or sports events with them; going together on picnics or on shopping trips; accompanying them to historic sites or museums; inviting them to one's home; and accepting invitations to theirs. When Muslims come into the homes of Christians, certain things should not be done to avoid offense. Never offer food in which alcohol is a component and make sure any pet dogs are kept away from them (most Muslims consider dogs "unclean").

When in the home of a Muslim, especially if it is the home of a traditional Muslim, do not pass food with the left hand or point the soles of the feet toward them when seated in their presence. If possible, avoid using their toilet which could cause uncertainty in the mind of the host and/or hostess regarding "ritual uncleanness." In a Muslim's home, dressing in a manner that Muslims consider immodest should be avoided. Building cross-gender friendships is another thing to avoid; it is fine to ask a Muslim husband or wife about the family, but (because of the possible implications) do not ask a Muslim man about his wife or a Muslim woman about her husband. Muslims do not usually want non-Muslims to compliment a baby or child—the parents may believe this will attract "the evil eye" and cause sickness. Neither the Qur'an nor the Bible should ever be laid on the floor or on the ground and nothing should be set on top of it. In addition, a marked-up or highlighted Bible is considered very disrespectful and irreverent to a Muslim.

The ultimate goal of befriending Muslims should be, for the Christian, to present the gospel of Jesus Christ to them. Those who are true disciples of Jesus were, at one time, "God's enemies, but have been reconciled to Him by the death of His Son" ([Romans 5:10](#)). And we have been given "the gospel of peace" ([Ephesians 6:15](#)) to share with everyone in the world. That message needs to be undergirded by earnest prayer, accompanied by a blameless life and a bridge-building lifestyle, and verbalized by humble disciples of Jesus who sincerely love Muslims and are eager to share their lives and their Savior with them.

Who is Allah?

Allah is an Arabic word that means “God” or, more accurately, “the God.” In Western culture, it is commonly believed that the word *Allah* is used exclusively by Muslims to describe their god, but this is not actually true. The word *Allah* is used by Arabic speakers of all Abrahamic faiths (including Christianity and Judaism) as meaning “God.” However, according to Islam, *Allah* is God’s proper name, while Christians and Jews know Him as *YHWH* or Yahweh. When Arabic-speaking Christians use the word *Allah*, it is usually used in combination with the word *al-Ab*. *Allah al-Ab* means “God the Father,” and this usage is one way Arab Christians distinguish themselves from Muslims.

Before the inception of Islam, most Arabs were polytheistic pagans, believing in an unfeeling, powerful fate that could not be controlled or altered or influenced by human beings. Muslims regard Muhammad as the last and greatest prophet, and they credit him with restoring to the Arabs the monotheistic faith of their ancestors. Islam and Judaism both trace their spiritual lineage to Abraham, but the God-concept of Islam is different from that of Judaism and Christianity in some significant ways. Yahweh and Allah are both seen as omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, and merciful. However, in both Judaism and Islam, God’s mercy is dependent, at least partly and many times fully, on man’s actions. The Islamic concept of Allah and the Jewish concept of Yahweh both deny the triune nature of God. They eliminate God’s Son, Jesus, and they also eliminate the Holy Spirit as a distinct Person of the Godhead.

Without Jesus, there is no provisional salvation—that is, salvation is based on man’s effort rather than God’s grace. Without the Holy Spirit, there is no sanctification, no peace, no freedom ([Romans 8:6](#); [2 Corinthians 3:17](#)). Christians trust that by Jesus’ death and resurrection, along with the indwelling of His Spirit, sin is forgiven, the conscience is cleansed, and the human soul is freed to pursue God and goodness without the fear of punishment ([Hebrews 10:22](#)).

A Muslim may love Allah and wish to please Allah, but the question in his mind will invariably be “Is it enough? Are my works enough to merit salvation?” Christians believe that God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to provide an answer to the question “is my work enough?” The answer is, no, our work is not enough ([Matthew 5:48](#)). This is shocking to anyone who has been trying on his own to appease God. But this was the point of Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount ([Matthew 5:1–48](#)). The Jews that Jesus spoke to, just like the Muslims who follow Allah, were trapped by the knowledge that nothing they did would ever meet God’s perfect standard. But Christ’s perfect life,

atoning death, and resurrection *did* meet God's standard ([Hebrews 10:10](#); [Romans 8:1–8](#)). Jesus' message to the Jews and His message now, to Muslims and everyone else, is “repent and believe” ([Mark 1:15](#)). This does not mean “stop sinning” and “believe that God exists.” It means “turn from sin and stop trying to please God by your own ability” and “believe that Christ has accomplished everything for you.” The promise to those who trust Christ is that they will become the children of God ([John 1:12](#)).

Allah offers no such promise. Muslims believe Allah will be merciful to them based on his evaluation of their performance. But salvation is never sure; it is never a promise. When the Western world looks with horror on things like *jihad* and acts of Islamic terrorism, they get a glimpse of the powerful fear that Allah instills in many of his followers. Faithful Muslims are faced with a terrible choice: obey the violent commands of an omnipotent deity whose mercy is given only to the most passionate and devoted followers (and perhaps not even then) or give themselves up as hopelessly lost and headed for punishment.

Christians should not regard Muslims with hatred, but instead with compassion. Their god, Allah, is a false god, and their eyes are blinded to the truth (see [2 Corinthians 4:4](#)). We should be praying for Muslims and asking God to show them the truth, revealing His promise of mercy and freedom in Christ ([2 Timothy 2:24–26](#)).

Witnessing to Muslims - What is the Key?

Through the gospel of Jesus Christ, God offers—and true disciples of Jesus have received—that which everyone in the world, including every Muslim, needs and long for: forgiveness for their sins, a loving heavenly Father with whom they can communicate personally, and assurance that eternal happiness awaits them beyond this life. The key to witnessing to a Muslim is getting him to understand that Islam does not offer these things and that Christianity most certainly does.

In fact, Christianity is the only religion that does.

Muslims use much of the same terminology that appears in the Bible: sin, salvation, heaven, hell, one God, law, and punishment. What is missing from their lexicon is the word “savior.” The Muslim does not believe that he needs a savior because he believes he alone must atone for his sin by his works. Islam teaches that man is born sinless and, therefore, does not have a sin nature from which he needs to be saved. His sinlessness was corrupted by external influences and can, therefore, be ‘cleaned up’ by works and efforts that please Allah. The Qur’an tells the Muslim that his good deeds can cancel out his bad deeds (Sura 11:114), but no one knows how many good deeds are enough. Muslims believe they can ask Allah for forgiveness from

sins, but Allah may or may not forgive them. There is, therefore (and this is the key), no assurance of salvation for Muslims.

Muslims believe one must be sorry for sin and repent of it, but the idea that payment for sin is required by a holy God is not part of Islam. It's important to begin with the idea that being sorry for sin will not help the Muslim when he stands before a holy God on Judgment Day. Ask the Muslim if a murderer will be allowed to go free if he says he's sorry in court. Most Muslims would agree that, if the judge is a good man, he must make sure justice is done. Being sorry won't keep the murderer out of prison. Then ask the Muslim if he believes he will go to heaven. Muslims believe in the Law of Moses, so ask if he has kept each one of the commandments perfectly. Once he admits he has lied at some time in his life or lusted after a woman in his heart, ask him, if an earthly judge can't pardon a murderer just because he is sorry, how can Allah forgive him when he has just admitted to being a liar or an adulterer in his heart? If he's at all honest, he will admit this is impossible. At this point, you can say that God made it possible for him to go to heaven even though he can't get there on his own. Preach Jesus Christ as our substitute for sin, our Savior from sins we cannot atone for ourselves. If you bring up the fact that Jesus is the Son of God or allude to the Trinity, be prepared for a broader discussion, as those ideas are anathema to Muslims.

Again, the key to witnessing to Muslims is their lack of assurance. Islam teaches that Allah was the source of both the Bible and the Qur'an, so they are willing to listen to passages from the Bible. Passages that speak to the wickedness of man's heart ([Psalm 14:1-3](#); [Jeremiah 17:9](#); [Romans 3:9-18](#)), the holiness of God ([Exodus 15:11](#); [1 Samuel 2:2](#); [Joshua 24:19](#); [Psalm 93:5](#)) and His hatred for sin ([Deuteronomy 25:16](#); [Proverbs 6:16-19](#)) will drive home the need for a Savior. As long as the Muslim believes he can atone for sin himself, the message of the gospel will be foolishness to him. If he comes to understand that "no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law" ([Romans 3:20](#)), the door is open for the light of the gospel to shine in his heart.

Of course, no one comes to the knowledge of the truth solely by good apologetics. The natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit because they are spiritually discerned ([1 Corinthians 2:14](#)), and the Holy Spirit is the only one who can open the eyes of the spiritually blind. Therefore, any witnessing efforts should be bathed in prayer that hearts and minds will be opened so that when we speak the truth in love to a Muslim, it may please the Lord to grant him or her salvation through Jesus Christ.

What is the Qur'an?

The Qur'an—often spelled as *Quran* or *Koran*—is the primary holy text of the Islamic faith. According to Muslim beliefs, the words of the Qur'an were dictated to Muhammad, who relayed them orally to his followers. The term *Qur'an* literally means “the recitation.” This message was delivered by Muhammad approximately 600 years after the earthly ministry of Jesus.

Islam considers the Qur'an to be the perfect, eternal, beautiful message of Allah and the only necessary proof of Muhammad's status as a prophet. The words of the Qur'an were kept in purely oral form until after Muhammad's death. At that time, the text was assembled into writing through the efforts of several early Islamic leaders. The Qur'an is shorter than the New Testament of the Bible, but, according to Islamic theology, it can only be truly understood when read in its original Arabic dialect. Islamic theology is based on both the Qur'an and various oral traditions collected over the centuries.

Islam teaches that Muhammad was accosted by the angel Gabriel and told to memorize a certain message. For several years, Muhammad kept this message a family secret, sometimes wondering if he had been attacked by a demon. Once convinced otherwise, he began to preach according to these received words. Over the next twenty-plus years, Muhammad gradually delivered more and more of the message. His followers memorized his words, maintaining an entirely oral record of the Qur'an. Only minor portions were inscribed on leaves, rocks, and bones.

The central message of the Qur'an is that mankind has drifted from the truths that Allah presented to men like Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Per Muhammad, man has corrupted the words and message of Allah. This particular “recitation” is meant to be the final, authoritative statement from Allah to mankind. Man is called on to submit to Allah: the word *Islam* literally means “submission.” Muslims are also commanded by the Qur'an to follow Allah's instructions and to employ various methods of “struggle” (*jihad*) to spread this submission worldwide.

While the Judeo-Christian Scriptures include a large amount of history as well as theology, the Qur'an is overwhelmingly theological. Most of the text is devoted to statements about the nature of Allah, creation, mankind's obligations, and the afterlife.

Recording the Qur'an: Abu Bakr and Uthman

After Muhammad died, survival of his message was entirely reliant on the *hafiz*—men who had memorized the entire Qur'an—and *qurra*—men who had memorized large portions of the text and were adept at reciting it. These sources rapidly

dwindled. The Islamic Empire's rapid military expansion resulted in many *hafiz* and *qurra* being killed in battle. In response, Islamic leaders began the process of recording the Qur'an in written form. This involved the memory of the remaining *hafiz*, as well as collecting various written fragments. The result was a single manuscript, kept by the leader of Islam, Caliph Abu Bakr.

However, as Islam continued to spread, variations within the Qur'an began to arise. This was due to continued oral memorization, alternate writings on leaves and bones, and differences of opinion between Muslims on what Muhammad had actually said. These disagreements were serious enough to spark violence. A succeeding caliph, Uthman, ordered all written copies of the Qur'an, including scraps, to be collected. These were given to a panel of scholars who were tasked with determining the "correct" words and pronunciations. Afterwards, Uthman sent a single copy of the written Qur'an to each of the major regions of the Empire, and ordered all prior copies—in all forms—to be destroyed.

This entire process was completed within thirty years of Muhammad's death.

This stands in stark contrast to the history of the New Testament. The Qur'an was purposefully compiled—at least twice—after Muhammad's death. Neither process produced a large number of physical copies. This process was entirely under the direction of the leaders of the Islamic Empire. After the second collection, all prior records were purposefully destroyed. In short, this means that the Qur'an we see today is the result of a tightly controlled process, under the direction of a very few people, very soon after it was first written down. There is no way to know if or to what extent this might have changed from the original.

The New Testament, on the other hand, was originally written by various authors at various times and places. These words spread during a time when Christianity was functionally illegal. Texts were copied freely, independently, and often. This was done without any central control, and without any restrictions. The end result is what we see today: thousands and thousands of surviving manuscripts from an extremely broad geography. The advantage to this is that no one group, church, or government ever had the ability to control what those manuscripts said. Any copyist errors or changes stand out clearly. By the time the Roman Empire cared about the Bible—*three hundred years later*—manuscripts had been in circulation for centuries. At that point, it was impossible to replace the texts with some controlled version.

In short, this means it is far more reasonable to assert that the current text of the Bible represents the original words of the authors than to make the same claim

about the modern Qur'an representing the original words of Muhammad.

Structure of the Qur'an: Ayat and Surat

The Qur'an is composed of 114 chapters, or *surat*. Each individual chapter, or *surah*, is typically given a name for easier identification, based on the content. Rather than being arranged chronologically, these chapters are ordered more or less from longest to shortest. Those with more verses, or more *ayat*, are generally the earlier chapters, while the shorter ones are placed at the end. As with the Bible, the length of any particular verse, or *ayah*, greatly varies. Not only are the Qur'an's chapters presented in non-chronological order, the topic under discussion from one verse to the next often varies wildly.

All together, the text of the Qur'an is much shorter than that of the Bible. Depending on whether one is counting words or letters, the relative size may vary. By most estimates, the Qur'an is slightly more than half as long as the New Testament and less than one-fourth the size of the Old Testament.

The Qur'an can be divided into two major categories of content: Meccan and Medinan. These correspond to the two major phases of Muhammad's ministry, the first in the city of Mecca and the second in the city of Medina. The character of Islam, of Muhammad's message, and the words of the Qur'an demonstrate a noticeable change when Muhammad left Mecca for Medina.

In Mecca, Muhammad was a relatively powerless, persecuted figure. Meccan *surat* tend to emphasize coexistence, non-coercion, peace, and so forth. These are the *ayat* most often cited by those claiming Islam to be a religion of peace. However, after moving to Medina, Muhammad became a powerful warlord. The later Medinan *surat*, from the end of Muhammad's life and the early days of the Islamic Empire, are notably more aggressive. These form the bulk of verses cited by those who believe Islam endorses aggression and violence.

Interestingly, Islam teaches a concept known as abrogation, or "replacement." Under this concept, a *surah* or *ayah* that is given later is considered more authoritative than *surat* or *ayah* given earlier. In literal terms, the later statement replaces and overrides the former. Abrogation is often referenced in discussions on contradictions within the Qur'an, especially with regards to the difference in tone between the earlier Meccan and later Medinan texts.

Interpretation and Use of the Qur'an: Hadith and Tafsir

The Qur'an does not occupy exactly the same place in Islamic religion as the Bible

does in Christianity. There are strong parallels but also major differences. The Qur'an is believed by Muslims to be the eternal, perfect message of Allah, which is actually more a parallel to Jesus: the eternal, perfect message (Word) of God.

Interpretation of the Qur'an is more complex than for other religious texts. Most Muslims cannot engage in deep study of the Arabic Qur'an, just as most Christians cannot engage in professional-level studies of the original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts of the Bible. The vast majority of Muslims worldwide do not speak the Arabic dialect in which the Qur'an is written. Christians have access to translations of the Bible. However, according to Islamic theology, the words of the Qur'an can be fully understood only in their original Arabic dialect. According to Muslims, the miracle of the Qur'an is in its supposedly perfect language and structure. "Translating" the Qur'an, then, is impossible according to Islam. Any change of the text, such as into another language, makes the end result an interpretation. This is frequently offered as reason why non-Muslims fail to accept the miracle of the words of Allah.

The short length and primarily oral nature of the early Qur'an encouraged the development of *hadith*, or oral traditions. Islamic scholars collected various comments made by those who knew Muhammad personally and that purport to be memories of Muhammad's own remarks on the Qur'an and the correct application of Islam. These comments are generally from Muhammad's wives, lieutenants, or close associates. Not all of these traditional tidbits are accepted by every Muslim. In fact, the differences between major schools of Islamic theology can be coarsely summarized by which *hadith* they accept or reject.

Because of the language barrier, the chaotic nature of the text, and the existence of the *hadith*, the Qur'an is significantly more obscure than the Christian Bible. The average Muslim does not have access to all of the thousands and thousands of variant collections of oral traditions that form the *hadith*. However, it is reasonable to say that the Qur'an's role in Islam cannot be properly understood without the *hadith*. In this respect, the Qur'an is only part of a Muslim's religious texts, albeit the most important.

As a result, most Muslims rely heavily on some form of interpretation-commentary in order to understand and apply the Qur'an. These commentaries are called *tafsir*, which generally combine explanation of context with the opinion of various Islamic scholars.

Competing Claims: The Qur'an and the Bible

Islam has a complex relationship with the Bible, in no small part because of statements made in the Qur'an. In theory, Muslims believe that Allah (God) gave written revelations to men like Moses and David. This, for them, also includes Jesus, whom they refer to as *Isa*. In some places, the Qur'an seems to suggest that the books given to these earlier men ought to be studied. In other places, it seems to suggest that those words have been corrupted. It also claims Allah will not allow his words to be changed. In some places, the Qur'an suggests that Christians worship a trinity of God, Jesus, and Mary—a gross misunderstanding of Christian teachings.

In short, the Bible stands as the strongest empirical evidence against the validity of the Qur'an. There are copies of the Bible, available in museums today, written centuries before the birth of Muhammad. The claim that the text of the Bible has changed cannot be sustained. And yet that text does not agree with the Qur'an or the Qur'an's claims about it.

While the Qur'an is held in high esteem by Muslims, it does not represent exactly the same position within the Islamic faith as the Bible does within Christianity. Its composition, character, and history are extremely different from those of the Bible. And, in the end, the validity of the Qur'an simply cannot survive a sustained comparison with the Christian Scriptures.