

Conversation with a Muslim and a Christian

An e-mail conversation between a Christian (Don Closson) and an earnest Muslim revealed the mindset and attitudes of a follower of Allah.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

It is always easier to deal with religious belief systems in the abstract. Cataloguing what a particular religion believes concerning the nature of God, human nature, salvation, and morality is usually a straightforward affair. Actually dialoguing with someone who holds to these beliefs can be far more interesting and challenging. So, although I possessed a general knowledge of what Islam teaches, I found that only by carrying on a long-term discussion with a Muslim did I gain a sense of the mindset and attitudes of a follower of Allah. A door was opened for me to experience some of the passion and zeal to be found in the Muslim evangelist. The discussion occurred via email, which muted some of the emotions that often accompany religious exchanges, but they still came through with considerable intensity.

The opportunity to carry on a discussion with a Muslim apologist arose when a campus minister asked if I would help respond to charges against the claims of Christianity being made by an Islamic leader at his school. I agreed, and soon realized that a number of others, both Muslim and Christian would be listening in on our discussion. Once introduced to my Muslim counterpart, let's call him Ali, the interchange began quickly. I wish that I could report that at the end of our discussion Ali placed his faith in Christ. In fact, I don't think that I made much of an impact at all on his thinking. Ali, as with all of us, chooses what to accept as evidence. He refused to even attempt to see any of the issues we discussed

from a Christian perspective. All I can do is pray that God might use our discussion down the road sometime, if God chooses to soften Ali's heart.

Over a six month period our discussion primarily focused on the person of Christ. Ali would ask questions and I would attempt to give an answer. I quickly realized that Ali's tactics and intentions were different from mine. He often used ridicule and intimidation in his responses and would pick and choose what to discuss and what to ignore, deciding when to move on to another topic in order to avoid really considering the material at hand. I have never considered myself a debater, I would much rather have a discussion with people who are really interested in the topic and graciously exchange viewpoints. If I were to enter another dialogue like the one with Ali, I would have to realize that I cannot assume that everyone thinks the way I do regarding dialogue across religious worldviews. The Bible tells us to be ready to give the reason for the hope that we have in Christ, and to do so with gentleness and respect. Don't assume the other person will follow the same rules.

Next we will look at the issue of the person of Jesus Christ from a Muslim perspective and begin to consider how one might make a biblical response.

Christological Mathematics

Since I had never spoken to a Muslim regarding the claims of Christianity, I was looking forward to the kinds of questions that might be raised. I was not surprised that the first issue that came up was the nature of Jesus Christ, since this really is the heart of the matter. Muslims believe that Jesus was a prophet, perhaps even a unique prophet, but not in any sense God. Ali got the conversation going by declaring that there was no place in the Bible that says that Jesus is both 100 percent God and 100 percent man. Along with this initial challenge Ali pointed out that he was very sensitive to proper

interpretation and would be looking for incidents of verse twisting in order to make a passage say something that it actually doesn't.

I sent Ali a [2500 word essay](#) that I had written earlier that contained multiple arguments for the deity of Christ and numerous biblical examples of Jesus saying and doing things that only make sense if He were indeed equal with God the Father. My response included indications of Christ's self-perception as God, as well as statements made by His disciples portraying their belief in His deity. I assumed that Christ's humanity was not the real issue. So I did not see a need to defend it. Ali's response was interesting. He noted that Muslims do indeed believe that Jesus was born of a virgin and performed many miracles, with the help of God. But then he stated, "From your response I think we both agree that the Bible does not claim that Jesus is both 100% God and 100% man." He later added, "If you don't have any verses to give us then let's move on to the next point."

At first I thought that Ali had not gotten my entire essay. How could he have missed my point? He reassured me that he had gotten it and then declared that since there is no verse that states the 100 percent deity and 100 percent humanity of Christ, we can go on. What I eventually realized was that he was demanding a single verse that actually declared a mathematical set of percentages for the mixture of deity and humanity in Christ. I was a bit surprised to say the least. When I asked for confirmation, he said that that was indeed what he was looking for.

Most people know that the verse numbers in the Bible were added at a later date for convenience sake. After reminding Ali of passages like Philippians 2:6-7 and the first chapter of John, I asked him why it was necessary to find this complex truth in one verse. He ignored my question and responded by claiming victory that indeed, the Bible does not claim in one verse that Jesus is 100 percent God and 100 percent man, and

he declared that we would now move on to the next point.

I must admit that I was a bit baffled, but not ready to concede the issue.

The Importance of Context

Ali's debating tactics might be called the "slash and burn" technique: never admit to using a weak argument and make good use of sarcasm to intimidate your opponent. He also likes to claim victory in the middle of an exchange of ideas and then declare that we are moving on to the next issue. However, before I moved on to his next question I tried once more to answer his first. All that got me was the charge that I was avoiding his second point. He wrote,

You see Don, what you have done in your last email is you completely avoided this verse, and then you went looking in the Bible for other verses in which you think Jesus claimed to be God and gave them to us thinking that it would somehow make us "forget" about John 5:30.

What about John 5:30? Jesus says; "By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but Him who sent me." Ali claims that the verse shows that Jesus is inferior and helpless, that in fact He can do nothing. The key to this passage, as always, is in the context. I pointed out to Ali that in John 5:19-23 Jesus says that "He can do only what He sees His Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does." Jesus raises the dead, has been given all judgment, and is to be given the same honor that the Father is given. Ali replied, "Great, this is what a messenger does, this doesn't make him god."

I pointed out to him that a messenger communicates on behalf of someone else. He does not claim to do what someone else does. Muhammad claimed to be a messenger of Allah, not to do

what Allah does. In fact, Jesus didn't claim to show the way as a messenger might, but He claimed that He was the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). In fact, the same chapter says that the Jews recognized that Jesus was claiming equality with God the Father and tried all the harder to kill him (John 5:18). Ali might disagree with this claim, that Jesus is God, but that is exactly the argument that is being made by this chapter and the rest of the book of John.

Ali pulls verses from their context and refuses to deal with the entire passage. When given evidence from the chapter that contradicts his views, he changes the meanings of words and ridicules what he finds to be unreasonable. Next we will look at Ali's rejection of the Trinity.

The Trinity

It is not surprising that Ali does not understand nor acknowledge the Trinitarian relationship between Jesus and the Father. Surah 4 verse 171 in the Qur'an calls on people of the book, Christians, not to commit excesses in their religion. It claims that Jesus was just a messenger of Allah and His Word, which was given to Mary. It literally tells Christians to "say not Trinity" for Allah is one. It is possible that Muhammad believed that the Trinity consisted of Jesus, the Father, and Mary. He rejected Jesus as the Son of God because he pictured Jesus as a physical offspring from a union of God the Father and Mary. This would commit the ultimate sin in the eyes of Islam, equating a physical thing with God the Creator (shirk). Ali writes, "To say that Jesus is God or Son of God is not only a mockery of Godhood, but blasphemy of the lowest order and an insult to the intelligence of men."

As a result, Ali alternates between denying that the Bible teaches that Jesus is God and ridiculing as illogical the notion the Jesus can be both God and man. He refuses to acknowledge the notion of the Trinity, even when it is the best way to bring together difficult passages. When enough

evidence is given that the Bible does teach that Jesus is both God and man, admittedly a difficult concept, Muslims reject the Bible as having been corrupted. They really have no other choice since the Qur'an specifically rejects the Trinity. It literally comes down to either rejecting their prophet Muhammad or accepting the validity and message of the Bible.

An interesting side note to this discussion is that Ali's position is very similar to believers of other religious groups who respect Jesus but reject Christianity. Jehovah's Witnesses claim that the Bible was corrupted following the passing of the apostles, and that they now have its correct interpretation, as do Mormons and the Baha'is, an offshoot of Islam. Mormons claim that their prophet Joseph Smith received their view of Jesus, found in the Book of Mormon, from the angel Moroni. Muhammad claimed to have received the Qur'an from the angel Gabriel. It is obvious that all of these revelations cannot be true as they each give us a very different Jesus. Paul has something to say about these different gospels. He writes to the church in Galatia:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! (Galatians 1:6-8)

A Difficult Decision

As I mentioned earlier, the outcome of the six-month interchange was neither a conversion, nor even a congenial agree-to-disagree ending. In fact, I ended the dialogue after realizing that continuing the exchange could profit little and that my time might be better spent elsewhere. I must add that this was not an easy decision to make. I wondered whether I

had given up too easily or had somehow not communicated adequately the hope that I have in Christ.

However, any hesitation to end the conversation was erased when I received a reply to my note to terminate the exchange. Ali told me that I could not quit. That in fact, he would announce on various web sites that both I and Probe Ministries had nothing to say regarding the reliability of the Bible if I did not respond to his challenges. This confirmed to me that Ali was simply using me to gain access to a larger audience in order to get out his message. He had no interest in a real discussion where ideas are considered and a minimal amount of graciousness exists.

I went back to the Scriptures to see how Jesus handled such people and what He taught His followers to do when they encountered ears that would not hear. In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus told his apostles that, "[I]f any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them." The meaning communicated was that those who reject the gospel must now answer for themselves. When the gospel is taught, it brings both judgment and salvation.

In Matthew 7:6 Jesus tells the apostles, "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces." Dogs and pigs do not signify any specific race or ethnic group. Jesus is teaching that those who have treated the gospel with scorn and clearly rejected the salvation it offers and have been hardened by their contempt are to be avoided.

When Paul and Timothy were opposed by the Jews, who became abusive, the book of Acts (18:5) records, "[H]e shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, 'Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility.'"

I get little pleasure from reading these passages. I wanted to change Ali's mind. However, when I told Ali that I was praying for him, he replied, "Don't preach to me, prove it to me." Given that he had ignored much evidence already, it told me that his ears were closed. However, I will continue to pray that God will soften Ali's heart and that one day he might have ears to hear the Gospel.

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A Short Look at Six World Religions – Understand the Beliefs of Non-Christians

An overview of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses from a conservative Christian perspective.

Islam

There are three monotheistic religions in the world, religions that teach that there is only one God: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

The term "Islam" means "submission" to the will of God, and the person who submits is called a "Muslim."

The founder of Islam is Muhammad, who was born in 570 A.D. At age 40 he claimed to begin receiving revelations from a spirit being he believed was the angel Gabriel. These later were recorded and became the Qur'an, Islam's holy book.

There are Six Articles of Faith that all Muslims hold to. The

first is that "there is no God but Allah." The second Article of Faith is belief in a hierarchy of angels, of which the archangel Gabriel is the highest. Each Muslim is assigned two angels, one to record his good deeds and the other to record the bad deeds. At the bottom of the angelic hierarchy are the jinn, from which we get the word "genie." They are a Muslim version of demons.

The third Article of Faith is belief in 104 holy books, with the Koran as the final revelation. The fourth is belief in the prophets. According to the Qur'an, God has sent a prophet to every nation to preach the message that there is only one God. 124,000 prophets have been sent, most of them unknown but some of them biblical characters, including Jesus. Muhammed, though, is the prophet for all times, the "Seal of the Prophets."

The fifth Article of Faith is belief in predestination. All things, both good and evil, are the direct result of the will of Allah. Islam is a very fatalistic religion.

The sixth Article of Faith is the day of judgment. Those whose good deeds outweigh their bad will be rewarded with Paradise; those whose bad deeds outweigh their good will be judged to hell. Islam is a religion of human works. The Bible tells us, though, that we can never earn God's acceptance on the basis of our deeds.

There are Five Pillars of Islam, obligations every Muslim must keep. The first is reciting the creed, "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his messenger." The second is prayer: 17 cycles of prayer, spread out over five times of prayer each day. They must wash in a prescribed manner before they kneel down and face toward Mecca.

The third pillar is almsgiving, 2.5% of one's income for the poor. The fourth pillar is fasting during the lunar month of Ramadan. Muslims must forego food, water and sex during

daylight hours. The fifth pillar is making the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lives.

Sometimes you will hear people say that Allah is another name for the God of the Bible. Is it the same? “Allah” is the Arabic name for God, and Arab Christians use the name Allah to describe the God of the Bible. Mohammed taught that there is one true God who is the same God that Jews and Christians (“the People of the Book”) worship. He began Islam on the foundation of the God of the Bible. We can say that in principle, we worship the same God. Islam began on the foundation of belief in the one true God to combat the pagan polytheism of the area. However, Mohammed departed from this foundation, and we differ in our understanding of how God has fully revealed Himself. In the Qur’an, Allah is a distant spiritual being, but Yahweh is a Father to His children. Allah does not love wrongdoers, but God demonstrates His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Allah has predetermined everything about life; the God of the Bible invites us to share our hearts with Him.

Hinduism

Hinduism may seem like an alien religion of people on the other side of the world, but it has infiltrated our culture in all sorts of ways. You’re probably familiar with most of the basic Hindu concepts without even realizing it. Have you seen the *Star Wars* movies? They are filled with Hindu ideas. Ever watch *Dharma and Greg* on TV? “Dharma” is an important Hindu term for moral duty. 30% of Americans believe in reincarnation, which is a Hindu concept. Transcendental Meditation is thinly disguised Hinduism. George Harrison’s song “My Sweet Lord” invokes a Hindu chant. New Age philosophy is Hinduism wrapped in Western garb.

Hinduism is tremendously diverse. It encompasses those who believe in one reality, Brahman, as well as those who believe in many gods—as many as 330 million! Some Hindus believe the

universe is real; most believe it is illusion, or *maya*. (This world view isn't consistent with reality. You won't find Hindus meditating on railroad tracks, for instance.) Some believe Brahman and the universe are one; others see them as two distinct realities.

Despite the diversity within Hinduism, there are five major beliefs of this religion. The first is that ultimate reality, called Brahman, is an impersonal oneness. In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Yoda tells Luke that everything—the tree, the rock, etc.—is all part of “The Force.” This is monism: the belief that all is one. Nothing is distinct and separate from anything else.

Another Hindu belief is that just as the air in an open jar is identical to the air around the jar, we extend from and are one with Brahman. All is one, all is god—and that means that we are god. In her book and movie “Out on a Limb,” Shirley MacLaine relates a time when she stood on a beach, embracing this concept and declaring, “I am god! I am god!” It's a very Hindu concept.

Humanity's primary problem, according to Hinduism, is that we have forgotten we are divine. The consequence is that we are subject to the Law of Karma, another important Hindu belief. This is the moral equivalent to the natural law of cause and effect. You always reap what you sow. There is no grace, there is no forgiveness, there is never any escape from consequences. It's a very heavy burden to carry. Not only that, but Hinduism says that the consequences of our choices, both bad karma and good karma, follow us from lifetime to lifetime. This is another Hindu concept: samsara, the ever-revolving wheel of life, death, and rebirth, also known as reincarnation. A person's karma determines the kind of body—whether human, animal, or insect—into which he or she is incarnated in the next lifetime.

The final major Hindu concept is liberation from the wheel of

birth, death, and rebirth. One can only get off the reincarnation merry-go-round by realizing that the idea of the individual self is an illusion, and only the oneness of Brahman is real. There is no heaven, though—only losing one's identity in the universal oneness.

Praise God that through the Lord Jesus, Christianity offers hope, forgiveness, grace, and a personal relationship with a personal God in heaven. Jesus means there's a point to life.

Buddhism

Buddhism does not believe in a personal God. It does not have worship, prayer, or praise of a divine being. It offers no redemption, no forgiveness, no hope of heaven, and no final judgment. Buddhism is more of a moral philosophy, an ethical way of life.

In his essay "De Futilitate," C.S. Lewis called Buddhism "a heresy of Hinduism." Buddhism was founded by a Hindu, Siddhartha Gautama, during the sixth century B.C. After being profoundly impacted by seeing four kinds of suffering in one day, Siddhartha committed himself to finding the source of suffering and how to eliminate it. One day he sat down under a fig tree and vowed not to rise again until he had attained enlightenment. After some time, he did so and became the Buddha, which means "enlightened one." He started teaching the "The Four Noble Truths," the most basic of Buddhist teachings.

The First Noble Truth is that life consists of suffering. The Second Noble Truth is that we suffer because we desire those things that are impermanent. This is absolutely central to Buddhism: the belief that desire is the cause of all suffering.

The Third Noble Truth is that the way to liberate oneself from suffering is by eliminating all desire. (Unfortunately, it's a self-defeating premise: if you set a goal to eliminate desire,

then you desire to eliminate desire.) The Fourth Noble Truth is that desire can be eliminated by following the Eight-Fold path.

In the Eight-Fold Path, the first two steps are foundational to all the others. Step one is Right Understanding, where one sees the universe as impermanent and illusory and believes that the individual does not actually exist. If you ever hear someone say, "The world is an illusion, and so am I. I don't really exist," they're probably exploring Buddhism. (You might want to pinch them and see what they do.) Right Thought means renouncing all attachment to the desires and thoughts of oneself, even as he recognizes that the self doesn't exist.

Other parts of the Eight-Fold path are Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Awareness, and Right Meditation. Ethical conduct is very important in Buddhism. There are commands to refrain from the taking of any life (that includes ants and roaches in your house), stealing, immorality, lying, and drinking.

The Eight-Fold Path is a set of steps that describe not only a good life but one which will move the follower toward Nirvana, the goal of Buddhism. Nirvana is not heaven; it is a state of extinction, where one's essence—which does not actually exist in the first place—is extinguished like a candle flame, marking the end of desire and thus the end of suffering.

One of the important concepts in Buddhism is samsara, a cycle of birth, death and rebirth. It differs from the Hindu concept of reincarnation in that Buddhism teaches there is no self to continue from one life to the next. Another important concept is karma, the belief that you reap what you sow, and your karma follows you through the cycles of samsara. Note the inherent inconsistency here: there is no self to continue from one life to the next, but one's karma does?!

Buddhism says there are many paths to the top of the mountain,

so there are many ways to God. Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through Me."

Judaism

Both Christianity and Judaism have their roots in Old Testament faith. But Christianity is really a sister, rather than a daughter, to Judaism, which is the religion developed by rabbis from 200 B.C. on.

When the Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D., that spelled the end of sacrifices and the priesthood. Instead of being guided by prophets, priests and kings, the Jewish people turned to rabbis as their authorities on matters of laws and practice.

There was basically one kind of Judaism until the eighteenth century when the Age of Enlightenment swept through Europe. That's when the three major branches of Judaism arose.

That one basic kind of Judaism is what is now called "Orthodox Judaism." It has a strong emphasis on tradition and strict observance of the Law of Moses.

Reform Judaism began in Germany at the time of the Enlightenment. Reform Judaism is the humanistic branch. In fact, there are many Reform Jews who don't believe in God at all. For them, Judaism is a way of life and culture with a connection to one's ancestors that is about legacy, not faith.

The middle-ground branch, seeking to find moderate ground between the two extremes of the Orthodox and Reform branches, is Conservative Judaism.

If there is any religious principle that Judaism explicitly affirms and teaches, it is the unity of God. You may have heard of the *Shema*, found in Deuteronomy 6:4³ "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." This one all-important principle is the reason so many Jewish people have a hard time

understanding Christianity, which they see as a religion of three gods, not one God in three Persons.

The Old Testament is the Scripture of Judaism. Many Jews, though, do not consider the Old Testament to be the Word of God or inspired, although they do give it respect as a part of Jewish tradition and history.

There are some lifestyle practices that set people apart as distinctively Jewish. Traditional Jews, usually Orthodox but including some from other branches, observe the Sabbath. This means abstaining from work, driving, and lighting a fire from Friday night to Saturday night. Orthodox Jews also keep kosher, which means keeping the Old Testament dietary laws. The most well known is the prohibition against mixing meat and milk at the same meal, although many people are also aware that most Jewish people do not eat pork or shellfish.

It is difficult for Jewish people to place their faith in Jesus as Messiah because it is not considered a Jewish thing to do. In fact, they see "Jewish Christian" as an oxymoron. For many, being Jewish equals "Not Christian." But there's another big reason it is so hard for Jewish people to come to faith in Christ. They don't see a need for "salvation," because there is nothing to be saved from. If there is a God, then Jewish people already have a special relationship with Him as His chosen people. Jesus is superfluous for Jews.

If you know someone who is Jewish, pray that God will cause the scales to fall from the eyes of their heart and they will see the truth: that there's nothing more Jewish or more godly than submitting in faith to one who was, and is, the very Son of God, and who proved His love for them by dying in their place on the cross.

Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses

Have you ever answered your door to find a couple of nicely-

dressed people asking to talk to you about spiritual things? Chances are they were either Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses. Since both groups send many missionaries not only into American homes but to foreign countries, it makes sense to cover them in a discussion of world religions.

Many people think of Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses as Christians in slightly different denominations, but this is not the case. To put it bluntly, both religions teach another gospel and another Jesus. They are cults, not Christian denominations.

Mormonism was founded by Joseph Smith, a teenage boy in New York. He claimed that he was visited by first God the Father and the Son, and then by the angel Moroni, who gave him golden plates, which he translated into the Book of Mormon. He said that Christianity had been corrupted since the death of the last apostle, and God appointed him to restore the truth. But Joseph Smith provided nine different versions of these events, which set the tone for the rest of his teachings.

Deuteronomy 18:22 gives God's standards for His prophets: 100% accuracy. Joseph Smith wrote a lot of prophecies, many of which never came true. He was a false prophet, and the religion he founded is not from God.

Mormonism is not Christian because it denies some of the essential doctrines of Christianity, including the deity of Christ and salvation by grace. Furthermore, Mormon doctrine contradicts the Christian teaching that there is only one God, and it undermines the authority and reliability of the Bible.

Jehovah's Witnesses was founded by Charles Taze Russell, another false prophet. His Watchtower Bible and Tract Society has produced a prodigious amount of literature. It has prophesied the return of Christ in 1914, 1925, and 1975. Again, by God's standards, the representatives of the Watchtower Society are false prophets.

Jehovah's Witnesses deny the basics of the Christian faith. They deny the Trinity. They believe there is one singular God, Jehovah. Jesus is actually the created being Michael the Archangel, and who became flesh at the incarnation. The Holy Spirit is not God but an active force much like electricity or fire. They deny the bodily resurrection of Christ. Like Mormons, they deny the existence of hell and eternal punishment.

Both of these religions teach salvation by works, not God's grace. And they teach that salvation is only found in their organizations.

What do you do if they come to your door? First, don't do anything without sending up a prayer of dependence on God. If you are not well-grounded in your own beliefs, unless you know not only what you believe but why it's true, then you should probably politely refuse to talk to them, and work on your own understanding of your faith. Both Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are very successful at drawing in church-goers who can't recognize false teaching because they don't know what's true.

If you do know the Bible and what you believe, then prayerfully and humbly answer their questions and comments by showing them what the Bible says. And pray that God's Spirit will show them the truth. He is grieved that people for whom Jesus died are so deceived.

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Christians to Muslims and Jews: “Crusades Were Wrong”

Written by Rusty Wright

Why would modern Christians retrace the steps of the eleventh-century Crusaders? To apologize for the atrocities of their ancestors.

Their “Reconciliation Walk,” which ends this summer in Jerusalem on the 900th anniversary of the Crusaders’ storming of the city, has garnered intriguing response across Europe and the Middle East. Representatives of Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Judaism, Islam and Eastern Orthodoxy will attend the July 15 Jerusalem event.

The Crusades’ outrages have long seemed one of history’s ugly abscesses. The thought of killing to reclaim a “holy land” in “the name of Christ” seems a sick farce.

The Crusaders’ committed horrible atrocities, raping, murdering and plundering Jews, Muslims and other Christians en route to Palestine. When they reached Jerusalem in 1099, blood flowed freely. Jews fled to a synagogue and Muslims to a mosque. Crusaders burned the synagogue, killing about 6,000 Jews, and stormed the mosque, butchering an estimated 30,000 Muslims. They left a legacy of fear and contempt in the Muslim world.

That’s why when Reconciliation Walk leader Lynn Green entered a Muslim gathering at a Turkish mosque in Cologne, Germany on Easter 1996, he didn’t know what to expect. He was in the city where the medieval Crusades began in 1096 with other Christians determined to retrace the steps of the eleventh-century Crusaders and apologize to Muslims and Jews for the horrors committed against their forebears in the name of Christ.

The Imam's (leading teacher's) public response was startling. "When I heard the nature of your message," he told the crowd, "I was astonished and filled with hope. I thought to myself, 'Whoever had this idea must have had an epiphany.'" In further conversation, the Imam told Green that many Muslims were starting to examine their sins against Christians and Jews but haven't known what to do, and that the Christians' apology was a good example for Muslims to follow.

125 Christians formally presented the "Reconciliation Walk" statement of apology in Turkish, German and English to about 200 Muslim disciples at the Cologne mosque. Loud, sustained applause followed. The Imam, the most senior imam in Europe, sent copies of the statement to 600 mosques throughout Europe. The Walk was off to a promising start.

The 2000-mile, three-year walk across Europe, through the Balkans and Turkey and south to Jerusalem has sought to build bridges of understanding and to turn back over 900 years of animosity among the world's three major religions. Response has been surprisingly warm. Audiences at synagogues and mosques have lauded the gesture, often in tears, and encouraged its proclamation. Nationwide press coverage and government protective escorts in Turkey brought crowds into the village streets to receive the walkers enthusiastically.

The Reconciliation Walk Message says the Crusaders "betrayed the name of Christ by conducting themselves in a manner contrary to His wishes and character. ...(By lifting up the Cross) they corrupted its true meaning of reconciliation, forgiveness and selfless love." The messengers "deeply regret the atrocities committed in the name of Christ by our predecessors. We are simple followers of Jesus Christ who have found forgiveness from sin and life in Him," they explain. "We renounce greed, hatred and fear, and condemn all violence done in the name of Jesus Christ."

The walkers cite Jesus' biblical affirmation that He came to

“proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed.”

Observers have found the Walk absorbing. International School of Theology church history professor Dr. J. Raymond Albrectson called it “a commendable and necessary venture, and better late than never.”

Duke University Professor of Religion Eric Meyers, who is Jewish, commented, “Reconciliation between Christianity and the Jewish people or Christianity and the Islamic world is certainly a laudable and noble aim.” Meyers hoped that what he called “God’s universalistic vision” would not be overlooked.

George Washington University Professor of Islamic Studies Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a Muslim, remarked, “Every effort by both sides to bring Christians and Muslims closer together and to unify them before the formidable forces of irreligion and secularism which wield inordinate power today must be supported by people of faith in both worlds.”

Apologizing for 900-year-old sins won’t restore the lives lost. But in a modern world where religious differences can prompt turf wars and ethnic cleansing, maybe it can provide an inspiring example to emulate.

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The Religion of Baha’i – What Does a Baha’i Believe

Lou Whitworth looks at the principles and claim of the Baha’i faith from a biblical perspective. Then, he compares the beliefs of Baha’i with the teaching of Christianity so we can

understand the significant differences between the two. He shows that Baha'i really offers nothing to our lives while Christianity offers an eternal relationship with our Creator God.

The Origin of Baha'i

The roots of the Baha'i faith go back to a nineteenth-century religion called "Babism." Babism, which broke off from the Shiite form of Islam, was founded in 1844 in Persia (now known as Iran). The founder, a young businessman who assumed the title "Bab" (which means "the Gate" or door to spiritual truth), began to proclaim a new religious system that took a marked departure from his Islamic roots. For example, he stated that the religious prophets were divine "manifestations" of God himself. He then proclaimed himself a prophet or manifestation of God greater than Muhammad, and claimed that he was sent by God "to replace Muhammad's religion and laws with his own." (1) He also saw himself as a "forerunner" to an even greater manifestation destined to emerge later. This person would be "the World Teacher who would appear to unite mankind and usher in a new era of peace." (2)

The Bab's message fell on responsive ears, and soon he developed a strong following. In fact, the growth of this movement, called the Babis, so alarmed orthodox Muslim leaders that the Bab was arrested. The bulk of his ministry occurred during this six-year prison sentence. The years between 1848 and 1850 were marked by bloody clashes between the Babis and the Persian government. In 1850 the government, in an attempt to eradicate the movement, executed the Bab by firing squad and launched a widespread persecution of his followers. The persecution reached its height in 1852 when the government massacred approximately 20,000 Babis. In spite of this horrible persecution, Babism continued to spread.

Before his death, the Bab had chosen a young disciple to be

his successor. The young man, Subh-I-Ezel, was not cut out for leadership and many of his responsibilities were performed by his older half-brother, Mirza Husayn Ali.(3) In 1863, the older half-brother, also a disciple of the Bab, declared himself the World Teacher. In other words, he claimed to be the fulfillment of the Bab's prediction of a coming World Teacher who would unite the world and bring peace. He then assumed the name "Baha'u'llah" which means "the glory of God."

Most of the Babis accepted Baha'u'llah as the World Teacher (and became "Baha'is"). Some, however, remained loyal to the younger brother. Violent skirmishes occurred between the two factions, and the two leaders accused each other of attempted poisoning.(4) The government sent Subh-I-Ezel, the younger brother, to prison in Cyprus, and the older to prison at Akka (now in Israel).(5) The younger man's following withered away, but Baha'u'llah's following grew in numbers and intensity. This is largely because his disciples, the Baha'is, recorded everything he said over one hundred books and tablets in all, and thus were able to keep spreading the word.(6)

Baha'u'llah spent many years in prison and/or exile, but because of all the recorded teachings his movement continued to grow. He lived to the ripe old age of 75 and died in 1892. His oldest son Abdu'l-Baha was given sole authority to interpret his teachings. He was considered to be infallible in his interpretation of Baha'u'llah's works, and he proved quite successful in spreading the faith outside of the Muslim world.(7)

Major Beliefs in Baha'i

Progressive Revelation Baha'i theology holds to the idea of progressive revelation. In their system there are different manifestations of God during different periods of time. For example, in the Baha'i religion, Abraham was a manifestation of God, but he was followed by Krishna, who was followed by Moses, then by Zoroaster, Buddha, Christ, Muhammad, the Bab,

and finally by Baha'u'llah. Each manifestation allegedly builds on the previous ones and brings new information and insight to man. Thus God's message to man is progressively revealed and enhanced over time through different prophets. Though each manifestation is considered legitimate and appropriate for its time, in some sense the latter always overrules the former. Baha'is teach that Baha'u'llah is the manifestation to humanity for this time. In accordance with this principle, one of the leading Baha'i teachers said that, "The fundamental principle which constitutes the bedrock of Baha'i belief [is] the principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is orderly, continuous and progressive and not spasmodic or final."(8)

Oneness and Unity The Baha'i faith teaches the oneness of God, the oneness of all religions, and the oneness of mankind. The emphasis on oneness is not window dressing; it is a core concept of the system. Unity is sought, taught, and preached today and is the goal for tomorrow. The mission of Baha'i life is to bring to fruition the unity of all mankind in a divine civilization based on the teachings of Baha'u'llah.

Laws and Obligations Every Baha'i should observe the following laws or obligations:

1. Pray every day.
2. Observe the Baha'i Fast from sunrise to sunset each day from March 2 through 21.
3. Consider work as worship.
4. Teach the Cause of God.
5. Avoid alcoholic drinks and drugs.
6. Observe Baha'i marriage.
7. Obey the government and not participate in politics.
8. Avoid backbiting and gossip.
9. Observe Baha'i Holy Days.
10. Contribute to the Baha'i Fund.(9)

The Twelve Principles Baha'i philosophy can be summed up in this statement: "The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens." Behind this maxim are the twelve principles of Baha'i thought:(10)

1. Oneness of God.
2. Oneness of Religion.
3. Oneness of Mankind.
4. Elimination of prejudice of all kinds.
5. Individual search after truth.
6. Universal auxiliary language.
7. Equality of men and women.
8. Universal education.
9. Harmony of science and religion.
10. Elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty.
11. World government.
12. Protection of cultural diversity.(11)

Extravagant Claims Baha'u'llah made some claims about himself that are breathtaking in their boldness. "He claimed to be the fulfillment not only of all Christian prophecies, but of many Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Zoroastrian and Muslim prophecies as well. In glory, stature and importance, Baha'u'llah eclipsed Jesus and all other Manifestations. He denied being Almighty God Himself, but taught that he, like all other manifestations, was the only source of divine guidance in his cycle."(12)

Dawning of Peace Baha'is believe that "Mankind is currently headed toward a socio- economic cataclysm. Out of this tragedy a golden age' will dawn, and Baha'is will be the only ones prepared to rule in this *new world order*. [Emphasis added.] War shall cease,' said Baha'u'llah, and all men shall live as

brothers.'"(13)

Contrasts Between Baha'i and Christianity

God and the Trinity In response to the Christian doctrine of one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Baha'i faith answers a resounding negative. The Baha'i's emphasis on unity (oneness of mankind, oneness of religion, etc.) is true here too. The concept of the Trinity is inconsistent and repugnant to their theology. They attribute the Christian belief in this doctrine to misinterpretation of the Bible. They view God as one person in much the same way as Judaism and Islam.

Jesus Christ To followers of Baha'i, Jesus is one of the great prophets. His manifestation of God superseded the manifestation of Buddha which had superseded the manifestations of Zoroaster, Moses, Krishna, and Abraham, respectively. But then Jesus and His message was superseded; first by Muhammad, then by The Bab, and finally by Baha'u'llah. The idea of Jesus as the unique Son of God, both God and man, is rejected in Baha'i. To them, Jesus is just one of nine manifestations, each of which came to bring more spiritual light to the world. What each one taught was true for his time until he was superseded by a greater manifestation.

The Holy Spirit For Christians the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Triune Godhead, the revealer of truth, who inspired the Scriptures, and empowers believers for Christian service and evangelism. He is also involved in the work of convicting, regenerating, indwelling, baptizing, and sealing believers. Baha'is believe that Christ's promise of another Comforter refers not to the coming of the Holy Spirit, but to the coming of Baha'u'llah (John 14:16).

The Resurrection of Christ In Christianity the central fact is the Resurrection of Christ. Baha'is, however, do not believe

in the bodily resurrection of Christ, though they do believe in a future resurrection of all human beings. They do believe that Jesus conquered death spiritually.

Atonement for Sin The Bible teaches that Jesus Christ's death on the cross paid the penalty for sin for all who will believe on (or place their trust in) Christ. Christ bore on His body the penalty of our sin. Forgiveness is a free gift to those who believe; good works are an evidence of the inner faith. In Baha'i, on the other hand, one arrives at what we would call "salvation" by practicing the "principles laid down by Baha'u'llah and by making every effort through prayer and personal sacrifice to live in accord with the character of the divine being."(14) Even then Baha'is must hope for God's mercy without which "no one would escape the divine judgment."(15)

Heaven and Hell The Bible teaches that there will be a final judgment, that heaven will be the future reward of those who have trusted Christ, and that hell will be the future home of those who have rejected Christ. Baha'i teaches that there will be a resurrection and a time of divine judgment. There is also an abode of the righteous, the paradise of God, but there is no concept of eternal flames or hell as taught in the Bible. Those who do not attain to the paradise apparently have the opportunity to progress spiritually until they are worthy of acceptance.

Baha'i's Organization and Goals

The Organizational Structure of Baha'i

Local Worship Centers In cities large enough to have at least nine adult members of the Baha'i faith, a "Spiritual Assembly" can be formed to hold official meetings and worship services. Worship services (usually held in homes) normally consist of singing and reading from the works of Baha'u'llah or Abdul Baha. In many countries the Baha'is build a National House of Worship. America has one in Wilmette, Illinois.

The Baha'i World Headquarters is located in Haifa, Israel, on the side of Mt. Carmel. A major building and landscaping program has resulted in a beautiful headquarters for the organization. It serves as a working headquarters as well as a tourist attraction and a very brilliant public relations center in which to expose the religion in a beautiful setting and win friends for the faith. One of those beautiful buildings is the Universal House of Justice, from which the whole ministry is run by an elected nine-person committee elected to five-year terms. Notable among the other buildings are the International Archives and the International Baha'i Library. All this construction on Mt. Carmel seems less strange when you remember that Baha'is believe that this site is to be the center of a coming one-world government and that one day presidents and kings from around the world will come to this site in search of world peace. Also these structures are effective in attracting new members.

The Goals of the Baha'i Religion

World Unity Some who have studied Baha'i closely are concerned by its organizational structure and its goals of world unity. For example, how is this unity to be achieved? Also, what would happen to those who refused to conform? Some of the statements from its leaders about expecting people to give up personal and national rights are unsettling, to put it mildly. A modern religious movement with global aspirations, but very small in size is not intimidating to anyone. But, let that organization grow and set in place various institutions with power to police and enforce its vision, and the picture changes dramatically. At that point, the possibility for abuse of dissidents is dramatically increased. For this reason, Baha'i bears close watching. Some have commented that the goals of political and religious unity and of universal submission to the Baha'i leadership sound similar to the oppressive false world church system that will exist in the Last Days. (For more information, see the Book of Revelation.)

One World "When Baha'is talk about the unity of mankind, or about one world, the Kingdom of God, they do not mean a mere mood or ethos of togetherness. They mean an international political empire of which the Baha'i Faith would be the state religion."(16) In fact, Baha'is intend to institute "a Baha'i world Super-State, a commonwealth in which all the peoples of the world would be subject to a single global authority. All nations would waive their national sovereignty and cede key rights to the Baha'i world Super-state."(17)

After the historian Arnold Toynbee examined the Baha'i faith, he came to believe that it could be the future world religion. Others have expressed similar thoughts. Though Baha'i seems small and innocuous at present, if it grows in size and influence to the point that it could succeed in its aims of unifying the world under its own terms, it could be a sinister force.

Weaknesses in the Religion of Baha'i

An Impersonal and Unknowable God In Baha'i, God is impersonal and unknowable. In Christianity, God is the believer's Father. Jesus spoke of God using a familiar, intimate term, "Abba," which means, "Daddy." The Muslim and the Baha'i know nothing of this intimacy.

No Assurance of Salvation In Baha'i, it is impossible to know whether or not you are spared from judgment and will go to the Paradise of God. Christians can know that we are forgiven and going to heaven (1 John 5:11-13). This knowledge is based not on our merit but on the mercy of God to all who will trust Christ as their sin-bearer. Apart from biblical Christianity which focuses on Christ's death, burial, and resurrection in payment for our sins, no religion, no philosophy, no program on earth has really dealt with man's sin problem. To the Baha'i, the Christian believer's claim of assurance of salvation is presumptuous. But this is a typical reaction of all non-Christian religions and cults because they all teach a

program of works with no assurance of salvation.

Is the Baha'i God fickle and changeable?—Why are many “manifestations of God” necessary? According to the Bible, God never changes (He is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, Heb. 13:8), and human nature doesn't change or evolve. The Baha'i faith, however, holds that the manifestations were given because of different needs in different times of human history. It also teaches that after enough time has passed mankind has learned sufficiently from one cycle and needs to grow and be stretched by a new “manifestation of God.”

Was Baha'u'llah an opportunist or a manifestation of God? How is it believable that the manifestation of Baha'u'llah followed that of the Bab by less than twenty years? Could mankind have grown, progressed, and mastered his teachings so rapidly? Hardly. For one thing, few outside of Middle East had even heard of the Bab and his new religion. Furthermore, the Bab himself had predicted that the next manifestations after him would be many years (1,511 and 2,001 years) in the future.(18) Note that he mentioned two manifestations. No wonder many of the Babis were surprised and rejected Baha'u'llah's claim.

There are many facts that we could cover, but this information in this essay is sufficient to show the open-minded person that the religion of Baha'i has some real credibility problems. There are, however, many noble-minded, sweet people in this cult who deserve to hear the truth in love and gentleness so they can be free from the grip of this false religion.

In a chapter on Baha'i from his book *The Kingdom of the Cults*, Walter Martin summarized in sad and melancholy fashion the emptiness of the Baha'i faith:

There was no virgin born Son, there was only a Persian student; there was no miraculous ministry, there was only the

loneliness of exile; there was no power over demons, there were only demons of Islam; there was no redeeming Saviour, there was only a dying old man; there was no risen Saviour, there was only Abdul Baha; there was no Holy Spirit, there was only the memory of the prophet; there was no ascended High Priest, there was only the works of the flesh; and there was no coming King, there was only the promise of a new era. (19)

Notes

1. John Boykin, "The Baha'i Faith," in Ronald Enroth, et al., *A Guide to Cults and New Religions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1983), 26.
2. Edmond C. Gruss, "Baha'i," *Cults and the Occult* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 1974, 3d ed., rev. and enl., 1994), 146-47.
3. Boykin, 26.
4. Ibid., 27.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Boykin, 28.
9. Official Baha'i booklet, "The Baha'i Faith" (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1981).
10. Larson, 147.
11. "The Baha'i Faith."
12. Boykin, 29.
13. Larson, 147, emphasis mine.
14. Walter Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany Fellowship, 1965), 256.

15. John Boykin, 30.

16. Ibid., 30 31.

17. Ibid., 31.

18. William Miller, cited in Gruss, 148.

19. Martin, 257.

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Christians Retrace Crusaders' Steps

Written by Rusty Wright

Lynn Green entered with apprehension a Muslim gathering at a Turkish mosque in Cologne, Germany, on Easter.

In one of the cities where the medieval Crusades began in 1096, the veteran Youth with a Mission staffer was accompanied by other Christians determined to retrace the steps of the eleventh-century Crusaders and to apologize to Muslims and Jews for the atrocities committed against their forebears.

The Muslim imam's public response startled Green and the others. "When I heard the nature of your message, I was astonished and filled with hope," he told the crowd. "I thought to myself, 'Whoever had this idea must have had an

epiphany.'" In further conversation, the imam told Green that many Muslims had begun examining their sins against Christians and Jews but have been unclear about what they should do. The repentance offered by Christians because of the Crusades has set an example of apologizing for Muslims to follow, the imam said.

The effort is being called the "Reconciliation Walk." And the 2,000-mile, three-year walk across Europe, through the Balkans and Turkey, then south to Jerusalem, seeks to build bridges of understanding and to reverse a legacy of animosity among three of the world's most prominent religions.

In Cologne, loud, sustained applause followed as 125 Christians formally presented the Reconciliation Walk declaration of apology in Turkish, German, and English to about 200 Muslim disciples. The imam, the most senior Muslim teacher in Europe, sent copies of the statement to the 600 mosques throughout the continent. With this achievement, the walk had a promising beginning in April.

REMOVING ENMITY

Green says the purpose of the walk, an independent initiative involving many Christian groups, is to remove enmity and mistrust.

Now, 900 years after the first Crusade, some Muslims and Jews still harbor ill feelings toward Christianity because of the atrocities committed. In turn, many evangelical Christians have disowned the Crusades as a dark chapter of pre-Reformational Christian history, finding it has little to do with their beliefs or practice.

In the eleventh century, Christendom witnessed a feud between the bishop of Rome (the pope) and the patriarch of Constantinople (modern Istanbul). Divided over doctrine, culture, politics, and turf, each excommunicated the other in

1054.

In the meantime, the aggressive Muslim Seljuk Turks advanced on the Constantinople-based Byzantine Empire, ambushing Christian pilgrimages to Palestine. When Byzantine emperor Alexius I appealed to Rome for help, Pope Urban II called in 1095 for a Crusade to wrest the Holy Land from Muslim control. Thousands marched, many convinced their efforts would help them gain eternal life.

However, the zealots committed the equivalent of modern-day ethnic cleansing, murdering Jews and warring against Muslims en route to Palestine. In 1099, when they reached Jerusalem, blood flowed freely. Crusaders burned a synagogue into which thousands of Jews had fled and stormed a mosque, slaughtering thousands of Muslims.

BETRAYING CHRIST

Participants in the reconciliation walk are focused on dissolving the ancient divides between Christians, Muslims, and Jews. The reconciliation walk message says the Crusaders “betrayed the name of Christ by conducting themselves in a manner contrary to his wishes and character.”

By lifting the Cross, “they corrupted its true meaning of reconciliation, forgiveness, and selfless love.” The messengers “deeply regret the atrocities committed in the name of Christ by our predecessors.”

“We are simple followers of Jesus Christ who have found forgiveness from sin and life in him,” they explain. “We renounce greed, hatred, and fear, and condemn all violence done in the name of Jesus Christ.” They hope to share their message face to face with 2 million Muslims.

The walk also is designed to heal rifts in Christendom. In Istanbul, an advance team focused on atrocities committed during the fourth crusade, praying for forgiveness at Hagia

Sophia and the Galata Tower. The destruction in Istanbul has been a barrier between the Orthodox and Catholic churches.

Green says response has been universally positive among the intended audience, although some Christians question the theological basis for contemporary Christians confessing to contemporary Muslims the sins of long-deceased predecessors. When Christians see these results, Green says the theological and historical debates, albeit important, become secondary.

Duke University religion professor Eric Meyers, who is Jewish, says, "Reconciliation between Christianity and the Jewish people or Christianity and the Islamic world is certainly a laudable and noble aim."

Meyers says, "In their fervor to bring the 'true' message of Christianity to Jews and Muslims, namely, 'reconciliation, forgiveness, and selfless love,' I sincerely hope that the participants will not lose track of the import of God's universalistic vision implicit in Luke (4:18-19) and at the very core of Old Testament eschatology."

George Washington University Islamic Studies professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a Muslim, says, "Every effort by both sides to bring Christians and Muslims closer together and to unify them before the formidable forces of irreligion and secularism, which wield inordinate power today, must be supported by people of faith in both worlds."

Organizers are inviting church groups across North America to join the walk. Small groups of a dozen or fewer will go for a week or more to declare the message.

The walk aims to reach Jerusalem in July 1999, the nine-hundredth anniversary of the Crusaders' invasion of the Holy City.

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What is Islam? – And a Christian Response

The history, current status, basic beliefs and practices of Islam are surveyed; as well, a Christian response to Islam is offered.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

It's not every day that religion appears as a front page story in today's newspapers, particularly on a regular basis. But over the past 20 years one religion has made the front page perhaps more than any other . . . the religion of Islam. Islam claims up to one billion followers worldwide. It is not only the fastest growing religion in the world, but its influence touches virtually every area of life—not only the spiritual, but the political and economic as well. What is more, its influence is being felt closer and closer to home. There are now up to 5 million Muslims in the U.S., and over 1,100 mosques or Islamic centers.

What does Islam teach? How are the teachings of Islam similar to those of Christianity? How are they different? What should our attitude be toward Islam, and toward those who follow this powerful religion? These are some of the questions we want to address in this essay.

The History of Islam

First, we want to take a look back at the history of Islam.

Islam was founded in the early seventh century by Muhammed. When he was 40 years of age, in A.D. 610, Muhammed claimed to be receiving messages from God. These messages were later compiled and recorded in the Koran—Islam's holy book.

About this same time, Muhammed began preaching against the greed, economic oppression, and idolatry that plagued the Arab peoples. He called on the many factions of the Arab peoples to unite under the worship of Allah, the chief god of the Arab pantheon of deities. Though his message was initially rejected, by the year 630 he had succeeded in gaining control of Mecca, the economic and religious center of the Arabian peninsula.

Though Muhammed died two years later, the religious/political movement he founded rapidly spread throughout the Arab world, and far beyond. By A.D. 750, the Muslim empire spanned from Spain in the west to India in the east. In the centuries that followed, Islam penetrated deeper into Africa and Asia, extending as far as the Philippines. During its "golden era" Islam claimed some of the world's finest philosophers and mathematicians. It was during this time also that Islam and Christianity clashed as a result of the Crusades to reclaim the Holy Land from the Muslims.

Beginning around 1500, and accelerating after the industrial revolution of the 1700-1800s, Islam felt the increasing influence of the European powers. Eventually, large portions of the Muslim world were colonized by European countries. This political and economic domination by Europe continued until the end of WWII, after which Muslim countries began to attain political independence. With the discovery and development of the vast oil reserves in many Muslim lands, economic independence suddenly came within reach also. At last, Islam had in its grasp both the opportunity and the resources to reassert itself as a powerful force in the world. After being on the defensive for many centuries, Islam was now on the offensive!

The Current Status of Islam

At this point we should discuss the current status of Islam. In doing so, it's important to realize that Islam is not a monolithic system. Though all Muslims draw their inspiration from Muhammed and the Koran, there are many identifiable groups and movements within Islam.

The most obvious division is that between Sunni and Shia Islam. The Sunnis (who compose about 90% of all Muslims) draw their name from the fact that they look both to the Koran and to the "sunna" in establishing proper Muslim conduct. The "sunna" is the behavior or example of Muhammed and of the early Muslim community. Of course, there are many subdivisions among the Sunnis, but they all identify themselves as Sunni.

The other major group of Muslims are the Shi'ites (who compose about 10% of all Muslims and reside mainly in Iraq and Iran). The word Shi'ite means "partisan," and refers to the fact that Shi'ites are "partisans of Ali." Ali was the son-in-law and cousin of Muhammed and one of the early Caliphs or successors to Muhammed as leader of the Muslim people. Shi'ites believe that the leader of Islam should be among the descendants of Ali, whom they believe possess a special divine anointing for this task. The last of these divinely appointed leaders, or "imams" most Shi'ites believe to be in "hiding" in another realm of existence. The Ayatollah Khomeini was believed to have been a spokesman for this "hidden imam."

A third group that should be mentioned are the Sufis—those Muslims (among both Sunni and Shia) who seek a mystical experience of God, rather than a merely intellectual knowledge of Him, and who also are given to a number of superstitious practices.

In addition to these divisions within Islam, mention must also be made of attitudes among Muslims toward their contact with

the Western world in modern times. Though the situation is much more complex than we are capable of dealing with in this pamphlet, two broad trends have been evident within Islam.

One trend is toward some degree of accommodation and adjustment to the West and to modern ways of life. This has manifested itself most obviously in countries like Turkey, which have instituted largely secular forms of government and Western ways of life, while maintaining Islamic religious practices.

The opposite trend is toward a return to a more traditional approach to Islamic life and a rejection of Western and modern ways. The most extreme expression of this trend is manifest in the various forms of Islamic fundamentalism, which insist on the implementation of Muslim law (called the Sharia) in every area of life. Fundamentalists have been most successful in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, and Sudan; but they are active in virtually every Muslim country, at times resorting to violence and terrorism in attempting to implement their agenda.

In understanding this potent religious and political movement, it is important to understand the various divisions and attitudes within Islam and the basic beliefs at Islam's core.

The Basic Beliefs of Islam

Though the beliefs of Muslims worldwide are about as diverse as those among Christians, there are six basic articles of faith common to nearly all Muslims.

The first of these is that there is no God but Allah. The pre-Islamic Arabs were polytheists. But Muhammed succeeded in leading them to devote themselves solely to the chief God of the pantheon whom they called Allah (which simply means God). To worship or attribute deity to any other being is considered *shirk* or blasphemy. The Koran mentions numerous names of

Allah, and these names are found frequently on the lips of devout Muslims who believe them to have a nearly magical power.

The second article of faith is belief in angels and jinn. Jinn are spirit beings capable of both good and evil actions and of possessing human beings. Above the jinn in rank are the angels of God. Two of them are believed to accompany every Muslim, one on the right to record his good deeds, and one on the left to record his evil deeds.

The third article is belief in God's holy books, 104 of which are referred to in the Koran. Chief among these are the Law given to Moses, the Psalms given to David, the Gospel (or Injil) given to Jesus, and the Koran given to Muhammed. Each of these is conceived to have communicated the same basic message of God's will to man. Obvious discrepancies between the Jewish and Christian Scriptures and the Koran (particularly with reference to Jesus and Muhammed) were accounted for by Muhammed in his suggestion that the Bible had been tampered with by Jews and Christians.

The fourth article of faith is belief in God's prophets, through whom Allah appealed to man to follow His will as revealed in His holy books. There is no agreement as to how many prophets there have been—some say hundreds of thousands. Among them were Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. But all agree that Muhammed was God's final and supreme prophet—the “seal” of the prophets. Though Muhammed himself said that he was a sinner, nonetheless there are many Muslims throughout the world who appear to come close to worshiping him.

The fifth article of faith is belief in the absolute predestinating will of Allah. Though some Muslims have modified this doctrine somewhat, the Koran seems to support the idea that all things (both good and evil) are the direct result of God's will. Those who conclude that Islam is a fatalistic religion have good reason for doing so.

The sixth and final article of faith is belief in the resurrection and final judgment. At the end of history, God will judge the works of all men. Those whose good deeds outweigh their bad deeds will enter into paradise (pictured in rather sensual terms). The rest will be consigned to hell. The paramount feature of Islamic belief, aside from its strong monotheism, is that it is a religion of human works. One's position with regard to Allah is determined by his success in keeping His laws.

The Basic Practices of Islam

Now we want to focus on the most important of those works. These are summarized in what are usually called the "Five Pillars of Islam."

The first pillar is recitation of the creed: "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammed is his prophet." It is commonly held that to recite this creed in the presence of two witnesses is to constitute oneself a Muslim—one in submission to God. Of course, the word Islam simply means "submission."

The second pillar is the regular practice of prayers. Sunni Muslims are required to recite specific prayers accompanied by prescribed motions five times daily. (Shi'ites do so only three times a day.) All male Muslims are also enjoined to meet for community prayer (and sermon) each Friday at noon.

The third pillar is almsgiving. Born an orphan himself, Muhammed was deeply concerned for the needy. The Koran requires that 2.5% of one's income be given to the poor or to the spread of Islam.

The fourth pillar of Islam is the fast during the month of Ramadan (the ninth lunar month of the Muslim calendar, during which Muhammed is said to have received the first of his revelations from God, and during which he and his followers made their historic trek from Mecca to Medina). During this

month, Muslims in good health are required to forego all food and liquid during daylight hours. This fast promotes the Muslim's self-discipline, dependence on Allah, and compassion for the needy.

The fifth pillar is the Hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca. If possible, every Muslim is to make a pilgrimage to Mecca once during his life. It can be made properly only on a few days during the last month of the Muslim year. The Hajj promotes the ideas of worldwide unity and equality among Muslims. But it also contains many elements of prescribed activity that are of pagan origin.

A sixth pillar, that of jihad, is often added. (The term means "exertion" or "struggle" in behalf of God.) Jihad is the means by which those who are outside the household of Islam are brought into its fold. Jihad may be by persuasion, or it may be by force or "holy war." The fact that any Muslim who dies in a holy war is assured his place in paradise provides strong incentive for participation!

Muslims around the world look to these pillars for guidance in shaping their religious practice. But in addition to these pillars, there are numerous laws and traditions contained in the Hadith—literature that was compiled after the completion of the Koran, that reportedly contains the example and statements of Muhammed on many topics. Because the laws of the Hadith and Koran cover virtually every area of life, Islam has well been referred to as an all-encompassing way of life, as well as a religion.

A Christian Perspective on Islam

At this point it is appropriate to offer a brief evaluation of Islam from a Christian perspective.

At the outset, it must be stated that there is much in Islam that the Christian can affirm. Among the most significant

Islamic doctrines that can be genuinely affirmed by the Christian are its belief in one God, its recognition of Jesus as the virgin born, sinless prophet and messiah of God, and its expectation of a future resurrection and judgment.

There are, however, some very significant areas of difference. We will mention just a few. First, the Muslim perception of God is by no means the same as that revealed in the Bible. Islam portrays God as ultimately unknowable. In fact, in the Koran, Allah reveals His will, but He never reveals Himself. Neither is He ever portrayed as a Father to His people, as He is in the Bible.

Second, though Jesus is presented as a miracle working prophet and messiah, and even without sin, Islam denies that He is the Son of God or Savior of the world. Indeed, it is denied that Jesus ever died at all, least of all for the sins of the world.

Third, though mankind is depicted as weak and prone to error, Islam denies that man is a sinner by nature and in need of a Savior, as the Bible so clearly teaches. People are capable of submitting to God's laws and meriting his ultimate approval. According to Islam, man's spiritual need is not for a savior but for guidance.

This leads to the fact that since in Islam, acceptance by God is something we must earn by our works, it cannot possibly provide the sense of security that can be found in the grace of God as taught in the Bible.

Many of us will find opportunities to befriend Muslim neighbors, co-workers, or friends. As we do, we should be aware of some of the barriers that exist between Muslims and Christians, due to past and current animosities.

The attitude of many Muslims toward Christianity and toward the West is colored by the history of conflict that has found expression in the Crusades of Medieval times, European

domination and colonialism, as well as Western support for Zionism in most recent times. We must allow the love of God to overcome our own fear and defensiveness and to penetrate these barriers.

In the past several years many Muslims have been deeply impressed by the compassion shown by Westerners (and particularly the United States) toward Muslim countries that have endured severe hardship. This kind of compassion can be shown on an individual level as well. As we do, we can then invite our Muslim friends to join us in a study of the New Testament, which reveals the only source of acceptance before God in His love and grace, expressed through the sacrifice of His Son Jesus Christ and His gift of the Holy Spirit.

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