

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.



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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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