

Christianity vs Islam



Summary:

The central message of Islam is submission to God (Allah). One submits to God by obeying the five pillars (confession, daily prayers, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage) and by affirming the six articles of belief (belief in God, in angels, in God's holy books, his prophets, in the coming day of Judgment and in predestination). If one obeys all this, Allah *may* choose to deem him worthy of heaven—a place of material and sexual bliss.

There is no compartmentalization of faith in Islam (no division between the “sacred” and the “secular,” or between a “private” and a “public” sphere of faith). Accordingly, “evangelism” for Muslims (expanding the caliphate) entails advancing both their beliefs, and Islamic society—which is governed by Shar'ia law.

Brief History:

Islam was founded by Muhammad in a tribal culture in the 7th century. As a young man, Muhammad led caravans for a wealthy widow named Khadijah—whom he later married. While he was meditating in a cave on Mt. Hira (in about 610), the angel Gabriel appeared to him and delivered a message from God. He recited the revelations as they were given to him—this eventually became the Qur'an.

Muhammad and his small gathering of believers were persecuted for their monotheistic beliefs in Mecca. Accordingly, after receiving an invitation to serve as leader in Yathrib (also called Medina), Muhammad and his followers moved there in 622 (This is called the *Hijrah* and is the beginning of the Muslim calendar). Muhammad grew in power, and returned to Mecca in 630 to take control of the city.

After Muhammad's death the leadership fell to Abu Bakr, then Umar, then Uthman. After Uthman there was a split which resulted in the division of Islam between Sunnis and Shi'ites. The Sunnis were traditionalists who accepted Mu'awiyah (the governor of Syria) as the next successor (*caliph*). Sunnis view the caliph as the head of the whole religious institution (including government). The Shi'ites were followers of a man named Ali, and regard Ali as the first imam (spiritual leader of the community). They see imams as spiritual, moral and theological leaders. The rest of these notes refer only to the Sunni branch of Islam, which accounts for about 80-85% of all Muslims today.

Central Practices of Islam: The Five Pillars

Islam is straightforward in that it is a religion of right practice. There is a set number of beliefs and practices that you must follow to gain Allah's favor. The five pillars are considered the whole of religious duty for Muslims.

- 1) **Shahada** (Confession): The central confession of Islam is: "There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet." Reciting this confession is also how one converts to Islam. Muslims do not put much emphasis on the attitude of the heart. Therefore simple recitation is all that is needed; your conviction does not matter.
- 2) **Salat** (Prayer): Muslims must pray at least five times a day (dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, nightfall and evening). Translated, the standard prayer is: "God is greater, there is no god but Allah. Hasten to prayer, hasten to prosperity. Prayer is better than sleep. God is greater, there is no God but Allah." Each line is chanted slowly and repeated twice. The prayers also consist of set postures, and the Muslim is supposed to face Mecca when praying. Prayer is simple religious duty—it is not for the purpose of growing in a relationship with God. Muslims believe that Allah is so high and above us that he would never desire to have a relationship with his creatures.
- 3) **Zakat** (Almsgiving): All Muslims are required to give 2.5% of their income to the needy. This is usually accomplished through the local Mosque. Muslims believe that consistent almsgiving gives one credit with God and can cancel out some sins.
- 4) **Sawm** (Fasting): All Muslims (unless pregnant or handicapped in some way) must fast during the month of Ramadan (the month when Muhammad began receiving the revelations). During daylight hours, Muslims do not eat or drink anything, and most choose to sleep through the day. During night hours (and before the sun rises), Muslims have parties and feasts. (One author noted that it would be more appropriate to call Ramadan a month of feasting!).
- 5) **Hajj** (Pilgrimage): Muslims should make at least one pilgrimage to Mecca during their lifetime (if they are physically and financially able). There are approximately two weeks of activities involved in this spiritual pilgrimage, including: kissing the black stone, circling the Kaaba seven times, running between the hills of Safa and Marwa in imitation of Hagar, and making animal sacrifices. Hundreds of pilgrims die during the Hajj due to heat and being trampled by the stampede of two million pilgrims.

Central Doctrines of Islam: The Six Articles of Belief (*Iman*)

Muslims do not have to understand the following six articles of belief. They simply need to be able to recite and affirm the list: "That you affirm your faith in Allah, in his angels, in his books, in his apostles, in the Day of Judgement, and you affirm your faith in the divine decree about good and evil." (from Sahih Muslim Book 1, #1)

- 1) **Allah**: You must believe that there is only one God (in contrast to both the polytheistic culture of Arabia, and the Christian belief in the Trinity). Islam places much emphasis on the transcendence of Allah—that he is nothing like us. They believe he is without emotions and beyond morality. He is the author of both good and evil. He is also considered to be arbitrary and unpredictable.
- 2) **Angels** (and other spiritual beings): Muslims believe in several different types of spiritual beings:
 - Angels: Are spiritual, reasoning beings created from light. Muslims believe that Gabriel is the highest of these—who transmitted the Qur'an to Muhammad. Each person also has

two recording angels who write down their deeds. These angels dwell on a person's shoulders—one writes down your good deeds, the other your bad deeds (These recording angels are greeted in the set postures/positions for praying). These angels will be consulted when Allah makes his judgment on your life.

- Qarina: Each person has a demonic equal that haunts and distracts them from the straight path.
- Jinn: Are evil spirits created from fire—though they can become good. Most Muslims are very superstitious and borderline animistic—believing that much of the evil we see in the world or experience is caused by these evil spirits at work.
- Shaytan (Satan): Is the ultimate evil being.

3) **Allah's books:** Muslims regard four books as holy:

- The Torah (*Tawrat*)
- The Psalms (*Zabur*)
- The Gospel (*Injeel*)
- The Qur'an

However, since the Qur'an contradicts the biblical books on many points, most Muslims believe that these previous books were corrupted at some point by the Jews and the Christians. In addition, supposedly everything written in the previous books was included in the Qur'an. Thus, on a practical level, the Qur'an is all that is needed and takes precedence.

The Qur'an is considered to be a verbatim transmission from God. Accordingly, it is only valid in the original Arabic. It is divided into different *suras*, or chapters. Although the form of the Qur'an does not follow the chronological order of the revelations received, Muslims believe that the revelations given to Muhammad last take precedence over the earlier revelations (For example, sura 9—out of a total of 114—is the last of Muhammad's revelations, and should take theological priority according to the rules of Islamic interpretation).

4) **Apostles/Prophets:** Prophets are seen as messengers from God. They are gifted with both piety and leadership ability. All prophets are also thought to be infallible: Although they can make mistakes, they do not sin in a strict sense (Accordingly, although it is true that Muslims believe Jesus was "just a prophet," this is actually a relatively exalted view of Jesus when you keep these concepts in mind. This means that Muslims believe that Jesus did not sin, and that he was a true messenger from God).

5) **The Day of Judgment:** Muslims believe that on the day of Judgment Allah will review the books written about our deeds. Allah will either judge a person by their works, or by simple foreordination (Muhammad's preaching on this subject was mixed). People will be consigned to either Paradise or Hell. Paradise is a pleasant place where a man's every desire is fulfilled (either by his wife or beautiful virgins). Hell is a place of perpetual burning and pain. Because Allah is not bound by morality or consistency, a person may practice Islam consistently and faithfully, and still be consigned to Hell on the Day of Judgment.

6) **Divine Decree:** Most Muslims believe that all things—good or bad—are foreordained by Allah. This leads to a denial of human responsibility. Accordingly, Muslims can be passive when it comes to issues that require action and responsibility. This is also why you may hear a Muslim repeat the phrase *insh'allah*. The phrase means ("If God wills it.").

Additional Terms and Beliefs:

- **Hadiths:** Hadiths are stories from the life of Muhammad. Because Muslims believe that Prophets are infallible, the example of Muhammad's life is considered authoritative. If the Qur'an is unclear on a point, the Hadiths are often consulted to solve the issue.
- **Shari'a Law:** This is the law that governs Muslims in all countries. Shari'a law has more to do with the day-to-day life of Muslims than the Qur'an. It was made and is redacted by considering the laws from the Qur'an, the consideration of the Hadiths (stories from Muhammad's life), and the consensus of the community. There are different schools of interpretation that give more or less weight to these various sources.
- **Ummah:** The *ummah* is the world-wide Muslim community. Christians have a parallel in their understanding of "the universal church." For Muslims, expanding the ummah by converting others (including Jews and Christians) is considered an act of merit before Allah, and an act of service to others.
- **Dhimmi:** A dhimmi is someone who pays a special tax for protection. Included in this group are "people of the book" (Christians) living in Islamic territories.
- **Jihad:** The word *jihad* simply means "struggle." For many westernized Muslims, the term describes an interior struggle for purity and to practice their Islamic faith well. However, in the Middle East, many leaders use the term to refer to struggling against the Western countries' influence and power in the world—particularly America, which is perceived as bent on destroying the Arab way of life. (Warren Matthews)
- **Personal Ethics:** For Muslims, personal ethics include not gambling, drinking alcohol, lying or stealing. For religious reasons, Muslims cannot eat pork. Muslims also believe that you should not be an aggressor. However, if an injustice has been committed, you are required to fight for vengeance.
- **What Muslims believe about Jesus:** Muslims believe that Jesus was a prophet (he appears in 93 verses in the Qur'an). He is considered to be the Messiah, God's Word, and born to Mary. But Muslims believe that the Gospels have been corrupted. They also believe that Jesus did not die on the cross. They think someone else took his place: perhaps Judas or Simon of Cyrene. They believe that Jesus was just a human messenger of God; Jesus is not considered God's son in any special way (Sura 112)

Evangelizing Muslims

"Since no Christian cared about me, I did not care about their message."

- Nabeel Qureshi

For many American Christians, the biggest barrier to reaching Muslims for Christ is their own heart. Because of tragedies like 9/11, and terrorist groups like ISIS, most western Christians want nothing to do with Muslims—either out of fear, anger or hate. However, we must remind ourselves that every person—whether Muslim or not—is made in the image of God, and God sent Jesus for all of us. Accordingly, the first step for many of us is to repent of attitudes of hard-heartedness and bitterness.

- 1) **Pray:** Pray for Muslims and opportunities to make friends with them.
- 2) **Relationship first:** "Effective evangelism requires relationships. There are very few exceptions" (Nabeel Qureshi). This is no less true for Muslims than for anyone else.
- 3) **Show Hospitality:** The Qur'an directs Muslims not to choose friends among Christians and Jews. Accordingly, we must work extra hard to befriend Muslims.
- 4) **Don't quiz them on their beliefs:** Most Muslims are not very theology-minded and do not understand their own faith. Accordingly, if you ask a Muslim a lot of theological questions it

might actually encourage them to investigate and grow in their understanding and practice of Islam, rather than consider Christianity. "Most Muslims who are usually not religious will put up a religious front when engaged in a discussion about Islam, whereas they may never bring it up if you don't." (Georges Houssney)

- 5) **Ask good questions:** A few suggestions are given below. Remember, don't focus so much on Islamic belief in general, but questions to help Muslims think about specific issues, and to consider the claims of Christianity.
- 6) **Focus on Jesus:** Many Muslims are curious about Jesus (*Isa*). It can be very effective to share stories from the life of Jesus, some of His parables, and even invite a Muslim to read and discuss one of the Gospels (*Injeel*) with you.
- 7) **Show the verses:** Most Muslims are more persuaded by wisdom and authority than by logic. Accordingly, it is much more effective to open your Bible and read a verse—rather than recite it from memory. Also, if you can think of a proverbial saying that supports your point, use it.
- 8) **Do not argue:** Tell a story, parable or your testimony.
- 9) **Speak the truth in love:** "In my experience, whenever I have told Muslims the truth, they appreciated it and responded positively. People of the Middle East appreciate direct speech because they are tired of smooth but dishonest words." (Georges Houssney)
- 10) **Know The Person's Culture:** Seek to understand the cultural background of the Muslim you are speaking to. If they were born and raised in the U.S. they probably share similar (modern and post-modern) assumptions as you do about the world. However, if they have a stronger Middle Eastern cultural background, they will respect boldness and courage. If you are very clear, upfront and bold about what you believe, Muslims from these backgrounds will have more respect for you and your message (The thinking is "If they are so bold, they must really have the truth!").
- 11) **Pray with Muslims:** Muslims use memorized prayers and do not have a concept of what a relationship with God might look like. Accordingly, it can be very moving and powerful for a Muslim to see and hear a Christian pray and talk with God.

Discussion Starters/Questions for Muslims:

- What do you believe about Jesus? Why don't you accept his teachings?
- Have you ever had a dream about Jesus/*Isa*?
- Would you be open to reading and discussing the Gospels (*Injeel*)?
- What evidence do you have that the Bible has been corrupted?
- If Jesus didn't die on the cross, why would Allah deceive so many people by making it seem as if he was?

Issues That Islam Raises for Us:

- **Against Compartmentalization:** Muslims view all of life as sacred and under Allah's jurisdiction—there is no separation of a "private/religious life" from a "public" life. This mirrors the teaching of the New Testament—that Jesus is Lord over all. However, many Christians in the U.S. do not live as if this were so. What would it look like to act as if it were true (since it is), that Jesus is the one in charge at your workplace? In our community? To live as if He is the real ruler of the U.S.?
- **Holistic Spirituality:** Many are drawn to Islam because of their tangible expressions of spirituality (kneeling when praying, having set postures and a pilgrimage to a mysterious

place). This attraction to physical expression of spiritual truth is in line with the Biblical world-view that God created both the spiritual and the physical—and we are to honor Him with all of it. Do we live out our faith in tangible spiritual disciplines?

- **Ultimate Values:** Hearing about Muslim terrorists dying for Islam brings up the question of ultimate value. An good question to determine how much you value something is: What are you willing to die for? In my own family I have seen parents chastised for letting their daughter go on a dangerous overseas mission trip, and then commend a family when someone in it determined to join the military. The haunting question is: What do we value more? America and democracy, or the spread of the Gospel and the kingdom of God? What are we really willing to give our lives for?
- **Just War:** Many Muslims critique ISIS and other terrorist groups—not for using the “sword,” but because their use of the sword does not reflect the guidelines laid down in the Qur’an and the Hadiths. In essence, Islam has its own version of a “Just-War” tradition. Seeing this caused me to question American Christians views on war. I found that traditionally, Christians have always been either pacifists, or just-war theorists. The troubling thing is that although many American Christians claim to uphold the Just-War position, few can explain what the Just-War theory actually entails. Can you? If not, on what basis are you affirming America’s involvement in different wars?

Sources Used:

- *Engaging Islam* by Georges Houssney (Treeline Publishing, 2010)

This is a great book written by a lebanese Christian who has spent years in the trenches ministering to Muslims. He is also a local (resides in Boulder). For those who are passionate about reaching Muslims, he teaches an annual class on engaging Islam at Horizons.

- *World Religions, 4th ed.* by Warren Matthews (Wadsworth, 2004)

This is a book written by a non-Christian surveying the major world religions. It has a good basic treatment on Islam.

- *Speaking of Jesus: The Art of Not-Evangelism* by Carl Medearis (David C Cook, 2011)

Carl Medearis is another local who has spent a lot of time ministering to Muslims. Although his book is about how to share your faith in a natural, non-threatening way, many of his stories and examples come from his experiences with talking to Muslims.

- *Who Is My Enemy? Questions American Christians Must Face About Islam and Themselves* by Lee C. Camp (Brazos Press, 2011)

This is a challenging book to read. It mostly deals with issues of war and peace and comparing Muslim and Christian views on these matters.

- Meetinghouse sermon series: *Isis, Islam and Jesus* Available at: <http://www.themeetinghouse.com/teaching/archives/2014/isis-islam-and-jesus/>

Recommended Reading:

- *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity* by Nabeel Qureshi (Zondervan, 2014).

Paul's warning/charge about angels

Isis and Islam

Myths about Islam

Brief History:

What

pbs documentary on pilgrimage/hajj

Comparing:

"Islam accepts Jesus as a prophet, but denies his sonship and redemptive death on the cross. Islam believes in God the creator, but denies that he is a personal, loving father. Islam accepts the books of the Bible, but claims that they are no longer reliable and that the Bible we have today has been corrupted. Islam believes there is a hell and a heaven, but provides no way to secure the believer's destiny except jihad, martyrdom, or dying during the hajj." (82)