

Comparative Religions Islam

By Wes Tracy & Stan Ingersol ¹

Focus

Stern ayatollahs, camel drivers kneeling on prayer mats in the desert, royal princes discussing international oil investments, fiery students proclaiming revolution and denouncing the West as the "great Satan" - such are a few of the common Western images of the Islamic religion. Yet, these are not the only images of Arab civilization, and they are not the majority ones of Islam.

About 1 billion people on our planet claim an allegiance to the Islamic faith. The most populous Islamic nation is Indonesia, where 100 million believers declare that "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger." Turkey, Russia, and large sections of Africa also support large numbers of Muslim devotees.

Islam is the Arabic term for "submission." A Muslim is "one who submits." The Muslims submit to the will of Allah as revealed by Muhammad. Today we will look at Islam, the fastest-growing religion in the world, in order to examine its impact on our own communities.

Biblical Foundations

Genesis 16; 21:1-21; Deuteronomy 3:1-7; 7:1-2; Philippians 4:1-13; 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18

Commentary

Use the Commentary as background information and discussion material as you prepare and as you facilitate this lesson.

Origins

Islam, founded by Muhammad, traces its roots to Abraham through Hagar and Ishmael. Muhammad was born in A.D. 570, orphaned at an early age, and raised by relatives. As a young man, he grew introspective and somber. He was given to visions, dreams, and seizures that may have been due to religious ecstasy.

One day as he prayed in a cave, Muhammad became possessed or filled with a spirit of prophecy, a demon, or an angel of God - he wasn't sure which. Whatever it was ordered him to recite the words supernaturally impressed upon his mind. Being illiterate, he could not write them down, so he memorized them.

Distraught, he fled the cave of prayer with thoughts of jumping off a cliff to keep from being possessed by an unknown spirit. He had always despised the Arabic soothsayers who claimed divine visions. Now it had happened to him. He would rather be dead. Yet as he fled, he was encountered by a divine being who called him the "Apostle of God." He was not convinced even by this encounter, but soon his wife and others persuaded him.

More trips to the cave followed, and more revelations came. In his town of Mecca, Muhammad began to preach his doctrines. He insisted that there was only one God. The 360 deities worshiped in Mecca were false - or 359 of them were. One Abrahamic cult that had spread throughout the area worshiped a god called Allah. Muhammad believed that their belief in this god was superior to all others. He began to preach and teach that Allah was the one true God.

Predictably, he was resisted and persecuted. Some of his followers were put to death. Soon the city of Medina invited Muhammad to make his headquarters there. They offered him a throne and an army. On July 22, 622, the devotees made their move to Medina (City of the Prophet). All Islamic calendars mark this date as their beginning. It is called the Hijira (the flight).

By the time of his sudden death just 10 years later, Muhammad, as the spiritual and civil leader, had subjected most of the Arab world to Islamic rule. Those who did not convert were driven out or killed. Within a century, Islamic armies had established a huge empire that stretched from Spain in the west to India in the east.

Over time, a number of different sects of Islam developed. The principal ones are the Sunnis, the Sufis, and the Shi'ites.

The Sunnis look to the Islamic scriptures (Quran, sometimes spelled Koran), the practice (Sunna) of the Prophet, the traditions (hadith), Islamic law (Sharia), consensus of the community (Ijma), and reasoning (O'yas) as the foundations for making personal and political decisions. The Sunnis appear to be the more moderate group.

The Sufis are those who have added mysticism to the rather legalistic, cold, and formal worship of mainstream Islam.

The Shi'ites form the most radical group. They claim to have descended from Muhammad himself and hold that only a direct heir should be the prime leader of Islam. This group of Islamic fundamentalists has taken power in Iran.

From the Shi'ites, it seems, come many of the extremists, radicals, and terrorists who push to the forefront Muhammad's sayings about jihad or holy war against the infidels. Jews, capitalists, and communists are the "great Satans" against which the radical Shi'ites war. Islamic fundamentalists wage terrorist campaigns in many parts of the world.

Still, most followers of Islam are sincere, peace-loving people. They will let you know that mainstream Muslims are not like the terrorists who use Allah's name to justify their violence.

Core Beliefs of Islam

The Muslim religion is built around five beliefs. Allah: Muslims believe there is one true God, Allah. He is transcendent, so far above us that He is unknowable. To speak of a personal relationship with God or to call Him "Father," as Christians do, is blasphemy. Allah is sovereign, running the universe as He pleases. Everything that happens is His will. Allah is the author of both good and evil. He blesses those who obey Him and punishes those who don't.

The Koran sees Jesus as a prophet, but not as a Savior or the Son of God. "Jesus is like Adam in the sight of God. He created him from dust and then said to him, 'Be' and he was" (Sura 3:59). "Jesus is not God's Son, for God has no Son. Jesus . . . was only a messenger of Allah . . . Far be it removed from His transcendent majesty that He should have a Son" (Sura 4:171; 5:116; 19:88; 43:82).

According to Muslims, Jesus did not die on the Cross. Most Muslims believe that Judas was substituted for Jesus while Jesus was spirited away to heaven. Jesus did not die and was therefore never resurrected. Jesus did not bring the final revelation from God; Muhammad did that.

Angels: Allah created angels from light. They do not have what humans call "free will" but obey Allah instinctively. Angels protect humans, keep Allah's records, deliver his messages, and administer his punishment. Two angels are assigned to each person. One writes down every bad deed. The other records good deeds. At the Judgment, a good deed outweighs a bad one 10 to 1.

Revelation: The Muslims believe that four books are inspired by Allah. The first three are the Torah (the first five books of our Bible), the Psalms of David, and the Gospel of Christ. However, Jews and Christians have allowed their sacred books to be corrupted. Therefore Allah gave one last holy revelation - the Koran. For Muslims, the Koran has precedence over the Bible.

Prophets: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus were all prophets, but the greatest of them was Muhammad.

Judgment: Those who have obeyed Allah and Muhammad will be rewarded at the Judgment by being sent to the Muslim heaven, called paradise. It is a place of pleasure. Others will be condemned to the torments of hell, though no true Muslim, it seems, will stay there forever.

Muslims do not know whether they are on the road to paradise or hell. They know they must earn their salvation by racking up good deeds aplenty, but in the end Kismet, the doctrine of fate, determines everything. This rigid predestination leads many to shrug, "It is the will of Allah," when challenged by adversity.

The Five Pillars

The Muslim is to add to the five doctrines the five observances or practices (called pillars).

The Creed: In order to become a Muslim, one must declare publicly, "There is no god by Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet." This is to be repeated many times a day.

Prayer: At five appointed times during the day, the Muslim is to recite prescribed prayers in a prescribed position (standing, kneeling, face to the ground, and so on), facing Mecca.

Alms for the Poor: Muhammad was himself an orphan and thus had sensitivity for the poor. At the end of each year, devout Muslims are to give 2 1/2 percent of their wealth in an offering for the poor.

Fasting: During the month of Ramadan, devout Muslims are expected to fast from sunrise to sunset. Most families eat a meal before dawn and another after dark. The fast is aimed at promoting self-control and empathy with the destitute. Eating, drinking, smoking, and sexual comforts are forbidden during this time.

Pilgrimage: If physically able, Muslims are expected to make a pilgrimage to Mecca to worship. If they cannot make the trip, it is wise to send someone in their place. This is important in avoiding hell and achieving paradise.

Other distinctive Muslim practices include avoiding pork, refraining from gambling, and not drinking alcoholic beverages. Males and females have distinct dress codes as well.

Islam and Christianity

It is difficult for Christians to find common ground with Muslims. Islam and Christianity share a common thread of history back to Abraham. However, footing for ecumenical dialog and service is difficult to discover when Islam refutes just about every core doctrine of Christianity. Muslims deny the authority of the Bible, the existence of the Trinity, the deity of Jesus Christ, the death and resurrection of Christ, salvation by grace through faith, and the possibility of a personal relationship with Christ.

One other point is troublesome for Christians. The historic status of females in some Islamic nations is a violation of the dignity that the Bible and Christianity give to women. The Koran tells the Muslim that women are "tillage" (a field to plow and seed). Marriage and sex are for the sole purpose of producing offspring. Children are an important measure of wealth and manhood. Therefore, a man is permitted to have up to four wives. It is true that in the Koran Muhammad urged men to treat their wives kindly, but he also said, "God has made the one superior to the other . . . Good women are obedient. . . . As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and banish them . . . and beat them" (Sura 4:31).

Most Christians and Muslims wish to be at peace with each other. They can respect each other but must stop short of embracing the other's core beliefs and must not act as if the differences are trivial.

One Christian missionary pointed out a basic difference between Christianity and Islam - the difference between Hijira (the flight) and the Cross. Jesus reached the peak of His popularity about the time that He fed the 5,000. The Galileans wanted to make Him their king. Jesus had already said no to a similar offer from the devil. Satan took Him to the top of a high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world. Jesus declined to win His following through political and military power. He chose, rather, the way of the Cross.

On the other hand, when Muhammad encountered persecution in Mecca, the city of Medina offered him a throne, an army, and a kingdom. Muhammad said yes. The Cross and the Hijira move in opposite directions. They invite people to very different perceptions of the nature of God and His kingdom. This foundational difference shows up in a hundred aspects of the two religions. ²

Confrontation is not the way for Christians to witness to Muslims. This has failed miserably for 14 centuries. Muslims, like Christians, hold sincere beliefs that are reinforced by culture and a religion that is a way of life. John Conlon gives us a useful clue about witnessing to Muslims. He points out that "people may have opposite views, but they still have similar needs."³ Islamic faith has vulnerabilities. Its cold legalism, remote God, and dependence on fate leaves the human heart without assurance of salvation, with no relationship with God, with no sense of peace, and no idea of a loving God of grace. Conlon invites Christians to so live that these elements which form the very heart of Christian experience are gently seen and noticed. In this way they may want to take a closer look at the Jesus who brings peace, healing, forgiveness, and love.

Perhaps the best hope for meaningful Christian-Islamic theological dialog will come from listening to the Christians who persevere so admirably in semihostile Islam-dominated countries. Christian communities in Egypt, Armenia, Syria, Lebanon, Ethiopia, and the West Bank have tenaciously preserved their ancient Christian heritage in Muslim states. They have been in limited dialogue with their Muslim neighbors for years, at least at the level needed for survival. Walter J. Harrelson suggests that the dialogue could begin around three concepts: (1) the nature of God's "oneness," since all are monotheistic, (2) the role of redemptive suffering in the two religions, and (3) the character of divine revelation in the scriptures.⁴

In-Session Community Building Options

Select one or more of these activities to begin building bridges between students as you introduce today's subject.

1. In the News
Before today's session, look through newspapers and magazines and gather articles or headlines that report current events involving Islamic countries.
To open class, present each of the news reports, briefly reading or summarizing them one at a time. Point out the widespread dominance of Islam in the world today.
2. First Impressions
Open by asking your students to mention what first comes to mind when they hear the word Islam. Write their responses on the chalkboard.
3. Allah
Ask your students for their impression of Allah. How do they respond when they hear the main teaching of the Koran, which says, "There is one God, Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet"?

Presentation Options

Select one or more of the following activities to present today's topic.

1. Minilecture/Discussion
You may wish to use this option as a way of introducing some or all of the Commentary material. (See Duplication/Transparency Master No. 1.) Keep the lecture to 20 minutes to allow time for discussion. After presenting an overview of the material in the Commentary, invite your class to respond to the following statement:
 - o As Christians, we believe that we have the truth. Yet, the Muslims believe they have the truth. What happens when we have competing truth claims?

- How can we best examine the claims of truth of another religion?
2. Group Study

Divide your class into four groups and distribute Duplication/Transparency Master No. 2. After presenting the material on "the five pillars of Islam" from the Commentary, assign the following verses to each of your groups to supplement your discussion of the second pillar "prayer": When: 1 Thessalonians 5:17; Philippians 4:4 Where: 1 Thessalonians 5:18; Philippians 4:11-13 How: Philippians 4:5-7 What: Philippians 4:8-9
 3. The Attraction of Islam

Ask your students to wrestle with the question of the increasing popularity of Islam around the world. Why would this religion be attractive to so many people in today's world? How is it that this religion is gaining adherents even in North America? What basic religious questions does Islam attempt to address and answer? In what direct ways does Christianity meet and surpass the religious needs addressed by Islam?

Summary Options

Select one or more of these activities to summarize and to give opportunity for students to apply the truth learned through this lesson.

1. A Knowable God

One difference between Islam and Christianity lies in how each perceives God. Allah is unknowable and only works through messengers. The Christian God, however, revealed himself completely to humans when He became human. Ask your students to think about both of these views of God.

 - Which provides greater fulfillment?
 - Which is easier to believe? Why?
2. Witnessing to Muslims
3. A Deep Love for Others

Close the session by reading Romans 9:1-5 and closing in prayer that your young adults will be open to opportunities God presents them to witness to their Muslim friends.

Use INTERSECT: Young Adult Discussion Starters to continue discussion on this lesson in a weekday Bible study session, as a take-home resource for further thought after today's lesson or to supplement your in-class teaching of this lesson.

Notes

- All of the Commentary has been adapted from Wes Tracy and Stan Ingersol, *Here We Stand* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1999), 307-13.
- David W. Shenk, "What's the Difference Between a Muslim and a Christian?" *Gospel Herald*, November 20, 1990, 794.
- John Conlon, "Why Is It So Difficult to Witness to a Muslim?" *Herald of Holiness*, January 1993, 25.
- Randall M. Falk and Walter J. Harrelson, *Jews and Christians in Pursuit of Social Justice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 134-37.

Selected Bibliography

Miller, Stephen M., *Misguiding Lights ?* Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1991.

The Five Pillars of Islam

(Text for duplication/transparency Master No.1)

THE CREED

"There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his Prophet."

PRAYER

Five times each day, facing Mecca

ALMS FOR THE POOR

2 1/2 percent of wealth each year

FASTING

During the month of Ramadan

PILGRIMAGE

Once in a lifetime to Mecca

The Principal Sects of Islam

(Text for duplication/transparency Master No.2)

1. The Sunnis
look to the Islamic scriptures (Quran , sometimes spelled Koran), the practice (Sunna) of the Prophet, the traditions (hadith), Islamic law (Sharia), consensus of the community (Ijma), and reasoning (O'yas) as the foundations for making personal and political decisions. The Sunnis appear to be the more moderate group.
2. The Sufis
are those who have added mysticism to the rather legalistic, cold, and formal worship of mainstream Islam.
3. The Shi'ites
form the most radical group. They claim to have descended from Muhammad himself and hold that only a direct heir should be the prime leader of Islam. This group of Islamic fundamentalists has taken power in Iran.

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