

YOU ASKED FOR IT, UNDERSTANDING ISLAM

by Kent Berghuis

Berghuis's accessible introduction to Islam for Christian readers, answering common questions about Islamic beliefs, practices, history, and the relationship between Christianity and Islam.

5 Chapters

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01 - A Brief History

A Brief History

Suggestion: A brief history of the Muslim faith and the Quran and a discussion of its differences and similarities to Christianity and the Bible...

Some questions to get us thinking about Islam:

1. Are all Muslims Arabs?
2. What is the most populous Muslim nation?
3. What does the term Islam mean?
4. Do Muslims worship the same God as Christians and Jews?

I. Muhammad and the beginnings of Islam.

Islam as a religion can be traced to their prophet, Muhammad, who lived from about 570-632 AD. He was a trader from the Arabian city of Mecca (or Makkah, in west-central Saudi Arabia) who grew increasingly spiritual in his adulthood. At the age of 40 he was on a retreat in a cave outside Mecca when he received his first revelation as the angel Gabriel (or Jibreel) appeared to him. Muhammad received a number of revelations, and three years after these began he began preaching to the locals, who were mostly polytheistic and kept idols for worship. Muhammad preached that there is only one God (Allah), that there was to be no idolatry, that there was to be complete submission to God in all of life. Because of his revelations, Muhammad was considered a prophet, and came to be thought of as the last and greatest of the line of prophets. The religion revealed to Muhammad was thought of as a restoration of the true religion which had come through the Jews and Christians, but the Jews and Christians had corrupted the holy books as well as the message. Therefore the great characters of the Bible, such as Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, and even Jesus, are revered by Islam as prophets of God that taught the true way of Islam.

After Muhammad began preaching, he was not well received by the residents of Mecca. He and his small but growing band of followers were treated badly and basically run out of town. In 622 Muhammad took his followers to Medina, about 280 miles to the north, an emigration that is called "hijra," marked by Muslims as the beginning of their calendar (Muslims follow a 12 month lunar calendar of 354 days; this is currently the Muslim year 1431 AH, or "al-hijra"). In Medina, Muhammad became a leader of note, uniting various warring tribes and growing thousands of adherents to his religious way. They continued to fight with the Meccan tribes, until finally Muhammad was returned to Mecca victorious, having united most of the Arabian peninsula under his new religion and law before he died.

Muhammad continued to receive revelations throughout his life, and these were written down by his closest followers. These written revelations were collected into the Qur'an (or Koran), the holiest book of Islam. There were also writings of Muhammad's sayings and customs, known as

the Hadith, which also are very important to Islam and the establishing of Islamic customs and laws. Based on all these writings, Muslims seek to form an Islamic society, which is referred to as Shariah law.

II. Subsequent history of the Islamic movement.

After the death of Muhammad, there were many leadership disputes, and a series of his closest companions ruled as caliphs and continued to expand the territory and influence of Islam into Persia and the Middle East (some of the leadership disputes resulted in the major division between Shia and Sunni Muslims, the two main branches of Islam, which divide still exists in very pronounced ways culturally and politically). Dynasties of leaders took over from the caliphs, and by 750 AD Muslims controlled a massive territory from the Indus valley in the East (including what is today Pakistan and Afghanistan), all the way through North Africa to Spain. They filled much of the power void that had been created by the crumbling of the Roman Empire, and these territories that had once been largely Christian were converted (sometimes forcibly) to Islam. Those who wished to remain as Christians or Jews were allowed property and social civil rights, but were required to pay an additional tax.

After 750 AD, Islam enjoyed its “golden age” culturally for about 500 years. Wealth poured through the various empires through trade, schools of learning were developed, and much of the knowledge of the Greeks and Romans was passed along through Islamic sources. In fact, one of the great spurs for what is called the European Renaissance was Italian scholars and Christians relearning the traditions of Western Civilization from Islamic scholars. As Christians in Europe regained some power, they often waged battles against the Islamic frontier territories. The Crusades were organized Christian religious military campaigns, usually called by popes, which often sought to free formerly Christian territories in the Middle East and the Holy Land from Muslim control. The memory of the Crusades as Christian attacks on their territories lingers very large in the Islamic mind to this day. This is especially true in that Islamic doctrine taught that once a territory was dedicated to Islam it could never revert to the control of unbelievers—so when that happens, it is always a sore spot and point of continual contention. From the Middle Ages to the modern era, the empires of Islam underwent general decline as Western European cultures grew in power and influence. European powers like Spain, France, and Great Britain colonized areas once controlled by Muslims. The largest remaining Middle Eastern power was the Ottoman Empire, ruled from what is today Turkey, and covering much of the Middle East and Arabia. But, Islam also continued to spread further east into Asia, becoming less an exclusively Arab religion and more of a global one. In WWI the Ottoman Empire sided with Germany, and at the conclusion of the war was conquered by the British and French allies, and numerous new nations were carved out of ancient tribal territories, often with uneasy balances of power. With the rise of the modern age of petroleum and massive deposits of oil discovered throughout the Middle East, Muslim fortunes began to rise. But this economic activity involves friction with non-Islamic people, and the competing forces within the Muslim world have contributed to the sometimes volatile geopolitical situation we find ourselves in today.

02 - The Quran and Schools of Thought

The Quran and Schools of Thought

Suggestion: A brief history of the Muslim faith and the Quran and a discussion of its differences and similarities to Christianity and the Bible...

Review Our last session offered a brief overview of the history Islam. We recall that Muhammad became the prophet of Islam after receiving religious visions from the angel Gabriel outside Mecca around the year of 610 AD. His preaching in Mecca resulted in his expulsion from the city, and he took his family and band of followers to Medina (called the Hijra, the beginning of the Muslim calendar). There Muhammad grew in power and influence, continued to receive visions, united the various Arab tribes of the area, and eventually reentered Mecca victorious before he died. His Muslim followers established powerful empires throughout the Middle East and North Africa in generations after his death, despite numerous cultural battles between them. In the Modern Era with the ascendancy of Western European colonialism, the Islamic empires were fading. In the 20th century new balances of power prevailed, and with the decline of colonialism and the influx of petroleum wealth, Islam once again became a more powerful world influence. Increasing radicalization of some sects of Islam have put them on a collision course with the West. Now the United States and much of the world finds itself in numerous conflicts related to Islam, especially with regard to issues related to radical Islamic terrorism, rising nationalism in states like Iran, and the perennially difficult questions stemming from the creation of the nation state of Israel in the midst of Muslim nations.

I. Origin of The Quran (or Qur'an, Koran)

Muhammad himself could neither read nor write. His first vision in the cave of Hira outside Mecca began with the voice of Gabriel awakening him with a startling command, "Read!" Muhammad protested three times that he could not read, but the force of the vision suggests that Allah would give people his words to read through Muhammad as his prophet. Thus in the Arabic language the word Quran means something like "what is read." Muhammad received numerous revelations throughout his lifetime. He did not write them down himself, but recited them to his followers, who did record them. After his death, the writings were compared by his disciples and compiled into the official format of the Quran, which is considered by Muslims as absolutely fixed and unchangeable, the version which existed in the mind of God from eternity past.

II. Content of the Quran The Quran is divided into 114 suras, which are somewhat like chapters. In general, the longest chapters are at the front of the Quran, and the briefest at the end. Each sura bears a title, often from key statements or themes that catch attention or open the sura. Each sura is divided into ayat, which are brief, like verses. The content of the Quran can be difficult to assess by the untrained learner. It does not have the variety of literature we find in the Bible, for instance, a collection which was written by numerous authors over hundreds of years for different purposes. Instead, the Quran reads as poetic words, perhaps most closely akin to later OT prophets. The

style seems decidedly polemical, as if there is always an opponent to be addressed. Often these opponents are the idolaters of Arabia, or often the Jews or Christians (referred to as “people of the book” or “Scriptures”) whose religions are being critiqued and revised into Islam. The recurring theme of submission to God pounds like a drumbeat. The day of judgment looms large, when the righteous will be separated from the wicked, and repeated warnings of graphic doom and promises of blissful paradise relate to this.

Muslim scholars from the very beginning have commented upon the Quran to seek its interpretation and application. This tradition even begins with Muhammad himself, who gave the verses as inspired revelations, memorized them and taught them to his disciples who recited them. Then he would expound on them, and the disciples would discuss them with him. So the Quran was viewed as the very words of God, not as Muhammad’s own. The Quran was recorded in classic Arabic, and only the Arabic version is properly considered the Quran. Translations are not considered authoritative, and only allowed as a kind of commentary on the Arabic Quran for the sake of those who do not understand it. All recitation and prayers from the Quran used in worship are performed in Arabic, regardless of the language of the people who are worshipping. This raises a large need for Arabic schools to train students in the reading of the Quran and the ways of Islam, called Madrasahs (simply the word for “school”).

III. Some Schools of Thought Within Islam The Hadith are additional narrations about the life of Muhammad and the early days of Islam recorded by his disciples. These are voluminous, and inform Islamic practice and Sharia law, their official codes of conduct. Different branches of Islam maintain different collections of these documents, and differ in approaches to enforcing Islam in society.

There are a variety of schools of thought within Islam. Two main branches we hear about are the Sunni, which is the majority, and Shia, which are found primarily in and around Iran. These divided centuries ago over disputes related to leadership. Another well-known form of Islam is the Sufi, which is a mystical branch. Known for its “whirling dervishes” who would dance in a dizzying manner, Sufis seek a deeper, spiritual meaning to the Quran and believe in seeking peaceful brotherhood with people of all religions (and are often looked upon as heretical by more orthodox Muslims). Within Sunni Islam there are several schools of thought as well. An influential movement known as Wahhabi follows the strict teachings of an 18th century leader from Saudi Arabia, and it is this branch of Islam that currently maintains the holy sites in Arabia and often contributes to the fundamentalist interpretations of Islam that advocate violent jihad and threaten the status quo of secular Islamic states.

03 - The Five Pillars

The Five Pillars

We began our “Understanding Islam” study with a brief overview of its history, beginning with Muhammad becoming a prophet and receiving his angelic revelations in the 7th century AD. Those revelations were written down and collected by his followers into the book known as the Quran, which they revere as the very words of God dictated to the world through Muhammad. We looked at some of the basic content of the Quran, as well as a few of the divisions and schools of thought within the Islamic world.

Almost all presentations of Islam include what they call their “Five Pillars.” The five pillars of Islam are mentioned in a saying of the prophet Muhammad in the Hadith collection, in which he says that Islam is based on these five things. These five core commitments or acts constitute the basis of what Muslims consider their basic duty to God. One can see that in some ways these religious duties may overlap with those of Christians or other religions, but the unique way in which they are carried out become the very essence of what it means to practice Islam.

I. First Pillar: Profession of Faith (cf. Deuteronomy 6:6-9).

Called Shahadah, this creed is a simple sentence: La ilaha ill Allah; Muhammad ar Rasul Allah—“There is no god but God (Allah), and Muhammad is the messenger (prophet) of God.” In the first line we see the strong commitment of Islam to monotheism and the worship of God/Allah alone. The second line stresses the belief that Muhammad brought the message of God to the world. Muhammad’s name is so revered that a devout Muslim will always say the phrase “peace be upon him” after uttering his name, and this even appears in printed books with the abbreviation “pbuh” (and similar expressions are used for all the prophets as well). Repeating and sincerely believing the Shahadah is the first step in being a Muslim. It is the first thing whispered into a baby’s ear when born, and the last thing whispered into the ear of a person at death.

II. Second Pillar: Prayer (cf. Matthew 6:5-8).

Muslims are called to pray (salat) five times every day—just before sunrise, just after noon, mid-afternoon, just after sunset, and one hour after sunset/night time. An optional sixth time during mid-morning may be observed for personal devotional concerns. Men are encouraged to pray at a mosque, especially on Fridays when they generally gather for other religious activities as well (women are not required to go to mosque, but they may go, and are kept separate from the men in a different room). Daily prayers may be performed anywhere. The calls to prayer have traditionally gone out from the minarets on mosques in Islamic areas, though today they typically use p.a. systems. The call to prayer begins with the phrase, Allahu Akbar, “God is the greatest.”

Muslims are required to perform ritual washings before prayers, known as wudu. The face and hands are washed, including a rinsing of the nose and mouth. Prayers are directed toward Mecca, with shoes off. The posture of prayer includes bodily gestures while uttering or thinking certain

prescribed prayers, and begins by standing, then raising hands to the ears, placing hands on the chest, then bowing down, standing again, then prostrating oneself on the floor or ground, which is to be covered with a prayer mat or carpet, then sitting upright with knees bent and palms on knees, before rising again.

III. Third Pillar: Almsgiving (cf. Matthew 6:2-4).

Zakah is a contribution that is intended for the poor. It is given once a year, and is paid at the rate of 2.5% of one's cash, savings, gold and silver. There are also separate rates for other forms of wealth or net worth.

IV. Fourth Pillar: Fasting (cf. Matthew 6:16-18).

Fasting (Sawm) is required during the month of Ramadan. Devout Muslims abstain from eating, drinking, smoking and sex during the daylight hours. Other fasts may be observed according to one's own devotional life.

V. Fifth Pillar: Pilgrimage (any Christian counterpart?). The Hajj is a journey to the great mosque, called Al-Kabah, in Mecca, to be performed by everyone who can afford it at least once during one's life. There are a number of rituals associated with the hajj, including the wearing of a simple dress made of two sheets of unsewn cloth. Millions of Muslims gather in Arabia for the annual hajj, and it is a powerful experience for them. After returning home, certain differences in clothing or hats are worn, and that person is thereafter referred to as "Haji...".

VI. Other duties

Jihad is the Muslim term for "struggle." According to mainstream Islam, Muslims are to struggle against their own evil impulses, and seek to live an upright life. It can also extend to society, in which there is an exertion of energy to establish the Islamic way of life. When Muslims come into conflict with other societies, that can also be described as jihad, a term which has become familiar in recent years due to the clash of cultures between Western society and some of the Middle East. Most Muslims do not see themselves engaged in jihad against the West, but a sizeable and radical element have taken to violent jihad in this manner.

Diet and dress—Muslims are required to eat only food considered halal, or approved. This is very similar to Jewish kosher rules, especially pork, but also includes alcohol. The dress code for women requires that a woman not call attention to herself. This is interpreted in various ways, but usually requires the wearing of a headdress or veil, or in more strict countries, a complete body covering. In comparison to Christianity, one might observe that Islam can seem quite focused on religious behavior. Seen from the perspective of grace, this can seem rather legalistic. But one can hardly help but admire their deep commitment to a way of life that can be quite intense, and governs all of one's thoughts and actions.

04 - Sharing Our Faith With Muslims

Sharing Our Faith with Muslims Our overview of Islam has indeed been brief, when one considers the size and diversity of this religion. As important as it may be to understand some of what Muslims believe, it is also important for Christians to consider how we are called to love our neighbors. With increasing globalization, nations are neighbors on a world stage, while individuals and families are also increasingly becoming neighbors within local communities. Within a few blocks of our own church there is the modest North Penn Mosque, with its local community of several hundred Muslims (most of whom are Bengali immigrants, although there are representative Muslims here from many nations of the world).

We might look at our interactions with Muslims on a couple of levels. On the one hand, Christians believe in sharing our faith in the hopes that others may come to know God through Jesus Christ. It should be noted that Muslims share a similar missionary conviction, hoping that non-Muslims might come to share their own faith. So while evangelical Christians may desire to see the conversion of our non-Christian neighbors, we must also realistically understand that we have commitments before God to love our neighbors regardless of whether they are members of our own faith or not. If we can learn to genuinely promote peace with Muslims, we will be doing humanity a great service, including the generations that follow us on an increasingly crowded and fragile planet.

I. The Development of a Baptist-Muslim Dialogue. The massive strain that has existed between Westerners in general and Muslims throughout the world has been highlighted and exacerbated by terrorist attacks and numerous wars in the Middle East. Since most people of faith oppose most violence and wars of aggression, it is distressing that acts of violence or wars are often fought in the very name of religion. It can hardly be escaped that many terrorist acts have been motivated by particularly radical kinds of religious beliefs, and while Western nations attempt to distinguish their motives as secular, large constituencies of Christians undergird governments involved in large-scale cultural clashes. In the midst of this volatile religious situation, it is heartening that in recent years an overture from the intellectual and religious leaders of Islam was sent to Christian leaders throughout the world. On October 13, 2007 an "Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders," entitled "A Common Word Between Us and You" was signed by 138 prominent Islamic leaders from all parts of the globe. This open letter was a call to further dialogue, and based on common ground between Christians and Muslims on the great commandments of loving God and neighbor. The Baptist World Alliance responded to this letter, as did numerous other Christian bodies, with a welcome for its peaceful, irenic tone. Acknowledgements have been made that both the Bible and the Quran repeatedly call for loving God and neighbor. The BWA also highlighted the need for discussion about what religious freedom might actually mean, in terms of not only being free to practice the religion of one's birth, but also to change religions if one feels called by God to do so. In response to these calls for further discussion, Dr. Roy Medley, General Secretary of our ABC-USA denomination, helped to initiate Baptist-Muslim dialogues here in North America. He was spurred on by visits to Lebanon

where Baptists urged him to help brothers and sisters in the Middle East by finding ways to promote peace with Muslims, as well as a trip to the Republic of Georgia where he was challenged to work for as good a relationship with Muslims as the Baptists enjoy with their neighbors in that country. In January of 2009 a group of 80 Baptist and Muslim leaders met at Andover-Newton Seminary in Massachusetts to engage in dialogue and observe each other's worship services. Several papers written by Muslims and Baptists for that conference, along with the "Open Letter," the BWA response, and Dr. Medley's introduction have been published in the American Baptist Quarterly volume 28, no. 1, spring 2009 edition.

II. Hindrances to Peaceful Interaction

Clearly there are significant differences between Islam and Christianity, and a focus on those differences will highlight how far apart we may be. But sometimes Christians engage in rhetoric that Muslims find offensive, and if we were to hear it with their ears we might appreciate how misguided such language can be. For instance, Christian leaders from America (often televangelists and the like) have sometimes characterized Islam as an "evil" religion, or Muhammad as being demon-possessed, or even as a pedophile. These kinds of statements are taken by the other side as slanderous, and signs that these Christians do not respect them or have peaceful intentions. Often these pronouncements are made from ignorance or stereotyping, and have the effect of glossing over positive attempts being made by the other side at overcoming very real problems within the world community.

III. Biblical Bases for Peaceful Interaction

Matthew 22:34-40 give us what Jesus regarded as the "Greatest Commandment": "Love the Lord you God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." He said the second commandment is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." While differences in understanding love for God remain, it was decided in the aforementioned Baptist-Muslim dialogues to start with the second command, where common ground might more easily be seen. Christians also point to the "Golden Rule," in Matthew 7:12 Muslims point to a very similar saying of Muhammad, "None of you has faith until you love for your brother what you love for yourself." When speaking about our neighbors, one might also consider one of the 10 Commandments, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). One might even ask in today's geopolitical situation if the command not to covet what belongs to our neighbor might even include petroleum? Additionally, Jesus commands Christians to love our enemies in Matthew 5:43-48, and Paul likewise urged peaceful living with enemies in Romans 12:14-21. See the interesting article, "Loving Bin Laden" from Mission Frontiers (March-April 2010).

05 - Sharing Our Faith With Muslims

Sharing Our Faith with Muslims

We have briefly explored some of the history and main beliefs of Islam, including a bit about the Quran and the “Five Pillars of Islam.” Last week we examined a Baptist-Muslim dialogue and discussed the need for working toward peace in getting along with our Muslim neighbors. This week we will look at how it might look to share our Christian faith with our Muslim neighbors in an authentic way. A helpful booklet was passed along to me entitled “Islam and Christianity: Reaching Out to Muslims, Answering Misunderstandings,” by Bruce Green. In comparing Islam and Christianity, this pamphlet is written for Christians to help us overcome misunderstandings of Christianity that Muslims may have, even as Christians may often have misunderstandings of Islam. The main categories printed here include:

I. Religious History.

Islamic culture has been at odds with Western European Culture for centuries. Today’s conflicts are often seen by them as another chapter in holy wars and Crusades. It may be important to point out that almost all Christians today believe the “Christian” Crusades of the Middle Ages were not a good expression of Christianity, and that wars are more often the result of political and economic forces. Behind violence and war lies Satan and evil, and common ground might be reached with a Muslim against a common enemy of sin.

II. Who is God? The Trinity is a sticking point for Islam, and Muslims tend to view Christians as polytheists who worship 3 gods, something strongly condemned in the Quran. It may be important to reinforce that the actual Christian teaching is one God in three persons, that there is only one divine essence or being, but this God is revealed to us in three relational persons. While this will likely still not be satisfactory, we can at least deflect the charge that we are not monotheistic. Also, Islam honors Jesus as a prophet, who was virgin born, performed miracles, and will return again. Some Muslims might be willing to read the accounts of Jesus in the Gospels to compare how Christians understand him in our Bible.

III. Holy Scriptures

Muslims are taught that Jews and Christians corrupted the Bible, therefore it disagrees with the Quran. However, the science of textual criticism has demonstrated the basic reliability of the text of the Bible, especially the New Testament. The Dead Sea Scrolls date from the first century AD (500 years before Muhammad), and also show that the Hebrew Scriptures were preserved remarkably well. Since Muslims revere the character of God, and they believe the main biblical characters were prophets, then it seems reasonable that the record of their words in the Bible could also be considered reliable.

IV. The Prophet Muhammad

Since Muslims so revere Muhammad, it is important not to insult him or be directly confrontational against Islam unless you want the conversation to be cut off and to be considered a blasphemer. It may be more important to lift up and exalt Jesus than to tear down Muhammad.

V. Practices and Rituals As we discussed earlier, Muslims find the essence of their religious practice in their “Five Pillars.” Christians also have important religious practices, some of them overlapping (giving, praying, fasting). We also observe baptism and the Lord’s Supper, read our Scriptures, attend worship with other believers, etc. All of these are intended to cultivate a spiritual life and sincere heart before God, something valued in Islam. By living a dedicated Christian life, we will gain the respect of Muslims who are trying to be devout themselves. But since the Christian practices are less legalistic and come from inner motivation, the genuineness may be appealing.

VI. Salvation and Paradise

Judgment day looms large in Islam, and the hope of entering paradise is a strong motivation for Muslims. But since their judgment is basically works-based, one never knows how good one may have to be, and there is always fear of God and insecurity. Christians can offer a gracious view of salvation in which Christ, our substitute, kept God’s law for us and offers forgiveness for all of our sins. God as a loving Father is also of great appeal to many Muslims who have become Christians.

VII. Religion and Culture

Muslims believe Western culture is corrupted by sex, drugs and alcohol. Muslims believe women are to be modest, and Western women are thought to have loose morals based on the way we dress and the images seen in media. It may be useful to point out that Christians also disapprove of many of the cultural images that are so widespread in society, and these do not represent Christianity but rather the secular culture in which most Christians find themselves living. While we may not wish to adopt the strict Islamic culture, we might appreciate their willingness to live in a counter-cultural way in the midst of the moral decay surrounding us.

VIII. List of “Do’s and Don’ts”

Do—live a righteous lifestyle, build relationships, practice hospitality, ask questions as a learner, explain your beliefs, talk about Jesus, pray with and for Muslim friends, treat your Bible with respect, be gender sensitive, observe body language, practice modesty

Don’t—assume Muslims know what Christians believe, be surprised if you are rejected or treated suspiciously, treat them as hostile or strange, insult the prophet Muhammad, argue, use your left (unclean) hand, get into compromising situations with a member of the opposite sex, assume Muslims are thinking the same way as you do.

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