

ISLAM

By

Josh McDowell

From the book, Understanding Non-Christian Religions

There are an estimated 450 million members of Islam (1.2 Billion, by recent estimates...GEA), which dominate more than three dozen countries on three continents. The word Islam is a noun, which is formed from the Arabic verb meaning "to submit, surrender or commit oneself." Islam means submission or surrender, and with the translation comes the idea of action, not simple stagnation. The very act of submissive commitment is at the heart of Islam, not simply a passive acceptance and surrender to doctrine. Muslim another noun form of the same verb, means "the one who submits."

History of Islam

The Muslim (var. sp.: Moslem) faith is a major driving force in the lives of many of the nations in the Middle East, West Asia and North Africa. The impact of this faith on the world has been increasing steadily. Today, Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the world.

The early history of Islam revolved around one central figure, Muhammad (var. sp.: Muhammed, Mohammed).

Muhammad

Muhammad was born around A.D. 570 in the city of Mecca in Arabia. His father died before his birth. His mother died when he was six. He was raised first by his grandfather and later by his uncle. Muhammad's early background is not well known. Some scholars believe he came from a well-respected family, but this is not certain.

At the age of 25, he married a wealthy 40-year-old widow named Khadijah. Of his life Anderson related:

There is evidence in a tradition, which can scarcely have been fabricated that Muhammad suffered in early life from fits. Be that as it may, the adult Muhammad soon showed signs of a markedly religious disposition. He would retire to caves for seclusion and meditation; he frequently practiced fasting; and he was prone to dreams. Profoundly dissatisfied with the polytheism and crude superstitions of his native Mecca, he appears to have become passionately convinced of the existence and transcendence of one true God. How much of this conviction he owed to Christianity or Judaism it seems impossible to determine. Monophysite Christianity was at that time widely spread in the Arab Kingdom of Ghassan; the Byzantine Church was represented by hermits dotted about the Hijaz with whom

Muhammad may well have come into contact; the Nestorians were established at al Hira and in Persia; and the Jews were strongly represented in al Madina, the Yemen and elsewhere. There can be no manner of doubt, moreover, that at some period of his life he absorbed much teaching from Talmudic sources and had contact with some form of Christianity; and it seems overwhelmingly probable that his early adoption of monotheism can be traced to one or both of these influences.

The Call

As Muhammad grew, his views changed. He came to believe in only one God, Allah, a monotheistic faith. He rejected the idolatrous polytheism of those around him. By the age of 40, the now religious Muhammad had his first vision. These revelations are what are recorded in the Qur'an (Koran).

Muhammad was at first unsure of the source of these visions, whether divine or demonic. His wife, Khadijah, encouraged him to believe that they had come from God. Later she became his first convert. However, his most important early convert was a wealthy merchant named Abu Bakr, who eventually became one of his successors.

The Cambridge History of Islam comments on Muhammad's revelations:

Either in the course of the visions or shortly afterwards, Muhammad began to receive "messages" or "revelations" from God. Sometimes he may have heard the words being spoken to him, but for the most part he seems simply to have "found them in his heart." Whatever the precise "manner of revelation"- and several different "manners" were listed by Muslim scholars - the important point is that the message was not the product of Muhammad's conscious mind. He believed that he could easily distinguish between his own thinking and these revelations.

The messages, which thus came to Muhammad from beyond his conscious mind, were at first fairly short, and consisted of short verses ending in a common rhyme or assonance. They were committed to memory by Muhammad and his followers, and recited as part of their common worship. Muhammad continued to receive the messages at intervals until his death. In his closing years the revelations tended to be longer, to have much longer verses and to deal with the affairs of the community of Muslims at Medina. All, or at least many, of the revelations were probably written down during Muhammad's lifetime by his secretaries.

These visions mark the start of Muhammad's prophetic call by Allah. Muhammad received these visions during the following 22 years, until his death in A.D. 632.

The Hijira

The new faith encountered opposition in Muhammad's hometown of Mecca. Because of his rejection in Mecca and the ostracism of his views, Muhammad and his followers withdrew to the city known as Medina, which means in full, "City of the Prophet," renamed from its original Yathrib.

The Hijira, which means "flight," marks the turning point in Islam. All Islamic calendars mark this date, July 16, 622, as their beginning. Thus, A.D. 630 would be 8 A.H. (in the year of the Hijira).

In his early years in Medina, Muhammad was sympathetic to both Jews and Christians, but they rejected him and his teaching. Upon that rejection, Muhammad turned from Jerusalem as the center of worship of Islam, to Mecca, where the famous black stone Ka'aba was enshrined. Muhammad denounced all the idols, which surrounded the Ka'aba and declared it was a shrine for the one true God, Allah.

With this new emphasis on Mecca, Muhammad realized he must soon return to his home. The rejected prophet did return, in triumph, conquering the city.

Muhammad now made sure of his political and prophetic ascendancy in Arabia. Active opponents near at hand were conquered by the sword, and tribes far away were invited sternly to send delegations offering their allegiance. Before his sudden death in 632 he knew he was well on the way to unifying the Arab tribes under a theocracy governed by the will of God.

Between the return to Mecca and Muhammad's death, the prophet zealously and militantly propagated Islam, and the new faith quickly spread throughout the area.

After Muhammad's Death

When Muhammad died he had not written a will instructing the leadership in Islam about determining his successor.

Eventually a power struggle developed, as different factions believed their own methods of establishing a successor were better than their rivals. The major eruption came between those who believed the Caliph should be elected by the Islamic leadership and those who believed the successor should be hereditary, through 'Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, married to his only daughter, Fatima. This struggle, along with others, produced the main body of Islam known as the Sunnis (followers of the prophet's way) as well as numerous sects.

Sunnis

Along with the Caliphate controversy, conflict raged on another front, that of law and theology. Through this conflict eventually four recognized, orthodox schools of Islamic thought emerged. All four schools accepted the Qur'an (Koran), the Sunna, or the practice of the Prophet as expressed in the Hadith (traditions) and the four bases of Islamic Law (Shari'a): the Qur'an, the Hadith, the Ij'ma' (consensus of the Muslim community) and the Q'yas (use of analogical reason). These four groups came to be called the Sunnis.

The Shi'a

The fourth Caliph to follow Muhammad was an early convert, along with his son-in-law, 'Ali. He was eventually murdered by Mu'awiya, who claimed the Caliphate for himself.

The tragedy that befell the House of 'Ali, beginning with the murder of 'Ali himself and including the deaths of his two sons, grandsons of Muhammad, has haunted the lives of "the party (Shi'a) of 'Ali." They have brooded upon these dark happenings down the years as Christians do upon the death of Jesus. A major heretical group, they have drawn the censure and yet have also had the sympathy of Sunnis and Sufis. They are among the sects whose radical elements al-Ghazali attacked as guilty of resting their claims on false grounds and sinfully dividing Islam. And yet, although agreeing with this indictment, the Muslim world at large has suppressed its annoyance at them, because their movement goes back to the very beginnings of Islam and has a kind of perverse justification, even in orthodox eyes.

The Sufis

In any strong, legalistic, religious system, worship can become mechanical and be exercised by rote, and God can become transcendent. Such an impersonal religion often motivates people to react. Such is the case with Islam, as the Sufis, the most well-known Islamic mystics, have arisen in response to orthodox Islam and to the often loose and secularist view of Islamic leadership during some of its early days under the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties.

The Sufis exist today and probably are best known through their Dervish Orders (e.g., "the whirling Dervish").

There are many other sects and divergent groups among Islam, too numerous to detail here. One might mention that the Baha'i Faith, although significantly different from Islam today, had its roots in Islam.

Teachings of Islam

NOTE: For a more detailed treatment of this subject, see page 110 of The Islam Debate by Josh McDowell and John Gilchrist.

Faith and Duty

The teachings of Islam are comprised of faith (imam) and practice or duty (din). Sir Norman Anderson explains:

The faith and practice of Islam are governed by the two great branches of Muslim learning, theology, and jurisprudence.... Muslim theology (usually called "Tawhid" from its central doctrine of the Unity of the Godhead) defines all that man should believe, while the law (Shari'a) prescribes everything that he should do. There is no priesthood and no sacraments. Except among the Sufis, Islam knows only exhortation and instruction from those who consider themselves, or are considered by others, adequately learned in theology or law.

Qur'an

The basis for Islamic doctrine is found in the Qur'an (Koran). Boa describes the central place of the Qur'an in the Islamic faith as well as the supplementary works:

The Koran is the authoritative scripture of Islam. About four-fifths the length of the New Testament, it is divided into 114 surahs (chapters). Parts were written by Mohammed, and the rest, based on his oral teaching, was written from memory by his disciples after Mohammed's death.

Over the years a number of additional sayings of Mohammed and his early disciples were compiled. These comprise the hadith ("tradition"), the sayings of which are called sunna ("custom"). The Hadith supplements the Koran much as the Talmud supplements the Law in Judaism.

The Qur'an is the Word of God in Islam, the holy scriptures. As the authoritative scripture, it is the main guide for all matters of faith and practice. The Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad as the Word of God for mankind.

As noted above, the Qur'an is comprised of 114 surahs, or chapters, all attributed to Muhammad. The surahs are arranged in the Qur'an by length-the longer in front, the shorter in back.

In modern times, the Qur'an has faced many of the same dilemmas as the Bible. A major issue is the inspiration of the Qur'an. Islamic scholars do not agree as a

whole on how the Qur'an came to be true or how much is true, although conservative Islamic scholars accept it all as literally true.

Five Articles of Faith

The five articles of faith are the main doctrines of Islam. All Muslims are expected to believe these tenets.

1. God. There is only one true God and his name is Allah. Allah is all-knowing, all-powerful and the sovereign judge. Yet Allah is not a personal God, for he is so far above man in every way that he is not personally knowable. Although Allah is said to be loving, this aspect of his nature is almost ignored, and his supreme attribute of justice is thought to overrule love. The emphasis of the God of Islam is on judgment, not grace; on power, not mercy. He is the source of both good and evil and his will is supreme.
2. Angels. The existence of angels is fundamental to Islamic teaching. Gabriel, the leading angel, appeared to Muhammad and was instrumental in delivering the revelations in the Qur'an to Muhammad. Al Shaytan is the devil and most likely a fallen angel or jinn. Jinn are those creatures between angels and men, which can be either good or evil. Each man and woman has two recording angels-one which records his good deeds, the other, his bad deeds.
3. Scripture. There are four inspired books in the Islamic faith. They are the Torah of Moses, the Psalms (Zabur) of David, the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Injil) and the Qur'an. Muslims believe the former three books have been corrupted by Jews and Christians. Also, since the Qur'an is God's most recent and final word to man, it supercedes all the other works.
4. Prophets. In Islam God has spoken through numerous prophets down through the centuries. The six greatest are: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Muhammad is the last and greatest of all Allah's messengers.
5. Last Days. The last day will be a time of resurrection and judgment. Those who follow and obey Allah and Muhammad will go to Islamic heaven, called Paradise, a place of pleasure. Those who oppose them will be tormented in hell.

The last day (the resurrection and the judgment) figures prominently in Muslim thought. The day and the hour is a secret to all, but there are to be twenty-five signs of its approach. All men will be raised; the books kept by the recording angels will be opened; and God as judge will weigh each man's deeds in the balances. Some will be admitted to Paradise, where they will recline on soft couches quaffing cups of wine handed them by the Huris, or maidens of Paradise, of whom each man may marry as many as he pleases; others will be consigned to the torments of Hell. Almost all, it would seem, will have to enter the fire temporarily, but no true Muslim will remain there forever.

Finally there is a sixth article of faith, which is considered by many to belong to the five doctrines. Whether this is one of the articles or not, it is a central teaching of Islam-the belief in God's decrees or Kismet, the doctrine of fate. This is a very rigid view of predestination that states all good or evil proceeds from divine will.

This strong fatalism has played a central role in Muslim culture. "To this the lethargy and lack of progress which, until recently at least, has for centuries characterized Muslim countries, can be partially attributed."

Five Pillars of Faith

Besides the five major beliefs or doctrines in Islam, there are also "five pillars of faith," foundational practices or duties which every Muslim must observe. They are:

1. The Creed (Kalima). "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah," is the bedrock of Muslim belief. One must state this aloud publicly in order to become a Muslim, It is repeated constantly by the faithful.
2. Prayer (Salat). Prayer as ritual is central to a devout Muslim, Boa comments:
... the practice of prayer (salat) five times a day (upon rising, at noon, at midafternoon, after sunset, and before retiring). The worshipper must recite the prescribed prayers (the first surah and other selections from the Koran) in Arabic while facing the Ka'aba in Mecca. The Hadith (book of traditions) has turned these prayers into a mechanical procedure of standing, kneeling, hands and face on the ground, and so forth. The call to prayer is sounded by the muezzin (a Muslim crier) from a tower called a minaret, which is a part of the mosque (the place of public worship).
3. Almsgiving (Zakat). Muhammad, himself an orphan, had a strong desire to help the needy. The alms originally were voluntary, but all Muslims are legally required to give one-fortieth of their income for the destitute. There are other rules and regulations for produce, cattle, etc. Freewill offerings also can be exercised.
4. Fasting (Ramadan). Faithful Muslims fast from sunup to sundown each day during this holy month. The fast develops selfcontrol, devotion to God and identity with the destitute. No food or drink may be consumed during the daylight hours; no smoking or sexual pleasures may be enjoyed, either. Many Muslims eat two meals a day during Ramadan, one before sunrise and one shortly after sunset.
5. The Pilgrimage (Hajj). The pilgrimage is expected of all Muslims at least once in their lifetimes. It can be extremely arduous on the old or infirm, so in their cases, they may send someone in their places. The trip is an essential part in Muslims' gaining salvation. It involves a set of ceremonies

and rituals, many of which center around the Ka'aba shrine, to which the pilgrimage is directed.

There is a sixth religious duty associated with the five pillars. This is Jihad, the Holy War. This duty requires that when the situation warrants, men are required to go to war to spread Islam or defend it against infidels. One who dies in a Jihad is guaranteed eternal life in Paradise (heaven).

Cultural Expression

Islam, like Judaism, is both a religion and a cultural identity, which cannot be separated from the people. In many countries the Islamic faith, though not strictly practiced, is woven into the web of society at every facet.

To their doctrine, which serves as both a religious and social foundation, can be added another unifying factor, the Arabic language. It helps weld Islamic peoples, living in different countries, together.

The family also is important in the social economy of Islam. Marriage is required for every Muslim, even the ascetics. Muhammad commanded men to marry and propagate the race, and though they may not have more than four wives, large numbers of the men cohabit with as many concubines as they choose.

Although the act of marriage is important, the sanctity of the union is not as highly regarded. A Muslim may divorce his wife at any time and for any reason. On the whole, women in Islamic culture do not enjoy the status or the privileges of the men and are very dependent on their husbands:

Since Muslim propagandists in this country persistently deny that women are inferior to men in Islam, it is worthwhile to set out the facts. Sura 4:31 says: "Men have the authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other and because they spend their wealth [to maintain them]. So good women are obedient, guarding the unseen [parts] because God has guarded [them]. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and banish them to beds apart and beat them; then if they obey you, seek not occasion against them."

Islam and Christianity

Many of the Muslim beliefs come from the Bible. Yet in spite of the influence and similarities, the differences in the beliefs of the two faiths are striking.

GOD

Islam teaches the unity of God's essence and personality, explicitly excluding the Trinity as taught in the Bible.

The emphasis on the unity of God comes across in other ways. Islam has God divorced from His creation, so unified to Himself that He cannot be associated with creation. His transcendence is so great that He acts impersonally.

Their doctrine of predestination and the fact that both evil and good came from Allah make their God very capricious. Whatever Allah chooses becomes right; this makes any true standard of righteousness or ethics hard to discern and practically impossible to establish.

This is unlike the righteous God of the Bible. The very word righteous means, "a standard."

The Muslim finds it difficult to divorce the concept of father from the physical realm. To them it is blasphemous to call Allah or God your father. To do so is the same as saying that your mother and Allah had sexual intercourse to produce you!

In addition, while calling God "Father" is to evoke thoughts of love, compassion, tenderness and protectiveness to Christians, it is not so to the Muslim mind. To him, a father is strict, shows no emotion, never expresses love, and is bound to his family by duty and for what his family can provide for him, not by devotion.

CHRIST

In Islam the person and work of Jesus Christ are not seen in the same way as in Christianity. For the Christian the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God is the vital cornerstone of faith, yet the Muslim does not hold either of these truths-that Christ is the Son of God or that He rose from the dead.

Islam does believe Jesus was a sinless prophet although not as great as Muhammad. While Surah 3:45-47 in the Qur'an speaks of the virgin birth of Christ, it is not the same biblical virgin birth. Jesus is certainly not the only begotten Son of God, and an angel-rather than the Holy Spirit-was the agency of God's power in the conception. However, the idea that Allah had a son is repugnant to them. Surah 4:171 states, "Jesus ... was only a messenger of Allah ... Far is it removed from His transcendent majesty that He should have a son."

John states concerning Christ,

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth ... And I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God (John 1:14,34, NASB).

Christ's claim for His own deity and sonship are unequivocal. In John 10:30, He claims equality with the Father when He states, "I and the Father are one." Not only is the sonship of Christ important per se, but the deity of Christ is also an important point of difference between Christianity and Islam since Islam denies the doctrine of the Trinity.

Of the crucifixion, the Qur'an states in Surah 4:157, "They slew him not nor crucified, but it appeared so unto them . . ." Most Muslims believe Judas was put in the place of Christ, and Christ went to heaven. The Bible teaches that Christ went to the cross to pay the penalty for man's sins, that He died and was raised from the dead, and that He appeared to the disciples and then ascended to heaven.

Paul recounts the events this way:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas and then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred (1 Corinthians 15:3-6, NASB).

Of the importance of the resurrection, Paul states, "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins" (2 Corinthians 15:17, NASB).

SIN AND SALVATION

The Muslim operates under a legalistic system and must earn his salvation. He holds to the Articles of Faith and follows the Pillars of Faith. For the Muslim, sin is lack of obedience to Allah. Thus man is sinful by act only, not by nature.

The Bible teaches that man is sinful by nature. Paul writes to the Romans, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23, NASB).

Summary

Historical roots tie Islam to Christianity, yet this is where the similarity ends. Islam rejects the key doctrines of the Christian faith—the Trinity, the deity of Christ, Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, and the sin nature of man and his salvation by grace alone through faith in Christ.

They also reject the Bible as the only authoritative book on which to base all matters of doctrine, faith and practice. When Islam rejects the truth of the written Word of God, they are left not only different from Christianity, but opposite from Christianity on all counts. Islam was founded by a dead prophet; Christianity was founded by a risen Savior.

Conclusion

Muhammad has based his teaching on inaccurate and untrue interpretations of the Bible. There is no historical evidence to support Muhammad's contentions that either the Jewish or Christian Scriptures have been corrupted. In addition, his teaching in the Qur'an is based on revelations, which he initially believed were demonic in origin.

Islam is an aggressive and impressive world religion. It appeals to those who welcome a religious world view which permeates every facet of life. However, it is ultimately unfulfilling. The Islamic God of strict judgment, Allah, cannot offer the mercy, love, or ultimate sacrifice on mankind's behalf that the Christian God, incarnate in Jesus Christ, offers to each individual even today.