

Islam

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I. Introduction

Everything in this religion is based on Muhammad's life and teaching, yet Muhammad is not the center of worship and devotion. God is. Muhammad's followers refer to their faith as Islam, "submission to God." They came to be identified as Muslims, "those who submit to God. Muslims consider the term Muhammadanism and its variants offensive because it implies to them that they worship Muhammad, which they do not.

II. Muhammad (570-632 AD)

As an ordinary Arab (age 1-35).

Muhammad, a descendant of Ishmael, was born into a minor clan of the Quraish tribe in Mecca.

Orphaned at an early age, he was raised by an uncle, Abu Talib. As a child, he took care of herds. Later, he subsisted as a camel driver.

Eventually Khadija, a wealthy widow, employed him. They fell in love and were married. As a wealthy merchant, Muhammad had contact with adherents of monotheistic religions on the trade routes and time to pursue religion.

As a religious seeker and visionary (age 35-52).

At the time, Mecca was a place where polytheism and animism thrived. Each tribe had its own deity and made annual pilgrimages to Mecca to pay homage. En toto, some 360 deities were worshipped. The first shrine that greeted pilgrims entering Mecca was a statue of God's [Allah's] three sensuous-appearing daughters (*al-Lat*, *al-Manat*, and *al-Uzza*). The *Ka'ba* that housed a black stone allegedly given to Abraham by Gabriel was dedicated to the god Habal.

In 610 AD, while meditating in a cave on Mt. Hira, overlooking the plain of Arafat, Muhammad fell into a trance. Trembling and sweating, he heard the angel Gabriel say to him, "Recite!" This was the beginning of a series of "recitations" given to him over a period of years.

Muhammad's career as a prophet in Mecca began. His message to the Meccans was this: There is only one God to whose will people must submit, and there will be a day of judgment when all people will be judged in terms of whether or not they have obeyed God. Some accepted what he said and became Muslims; others (the majority) rejected his message.

His "Flight" and the Subsequent Growth of the Theocracy (age 52-62).

Rejection of Muhammad and his message by the leaders of the Quraish led him to look for some other place where this new religion could be established. The people of Yathrib (now Medina) had expressed interest and openness to Muhammad and his followers, so they left Mecca in 622 AD and settled there. Muslims use the date of the migration, the *hijrah*, as the start of the Muslim era. [AH = After the *hijrah*].

In early January 630 AD [8 AH] Muhammad led an army of 10,000 to Mecca and conquered his enemies. The *Ka'ba* was cleansed of idols and shrines to pagan gods were destroyed. Muhammad retained Mecca as the center for pilgrimage, and certain holy

places, such as the *Ka'ba* and the well *Zamzam*.

He died in 632 AD (10 AH).

III. Beliefs [*imam*]

Beliefs regarding God.

1. "There is no God but Allah" [*La-ilaha-ill-allah*]. This affirms
 - a. the oneness of God. [Note: The unforgivable sin in Islam is *shirk*, ascribing any of the exclusive power or rights of Allah to another or to an associate.]
 - b. the uniqueness of God.
2. "God is the greatest" [*Allah-o-akbar*]. This affirms that
 - a. God can do anything he wants.
 - b. God is far greater than all created beings.
 - c. God needs nothing.
3. "In the name of Allah, the most gracious and the most merciful" [*Bis-millah-al-rahman-o-rahim*]. This states that
 - a. God is most gracious.
 - b. God is most merciful.
4. "If God wills" [*Insha-allah*]-This affirms that God predestines everything that happens.

Beliefs regarding angels and jinn.

1. Angels are created from light.
 - a. A hierarchy of angels exist between Allah and humanity.
 - b. There are four archangels: *Jibra'il* (Gabriel), *Mika'il* (Michael), *Izra'il* (the angel of death), and *Israfil* (the angel who will blow the trumpet at the day of resurrection and judgment).
 - c. Each person has two angels assigned to him or her: one to record good deeds, and the other, bad deeds.
2. *Jinn* are created from fire. Although some are good, these spirits are usually bad and have the ability to possess people.

Beliefs regarding prophets

From time to time in history, God has disclosed his will through a prophet.

1. Each prophet is for a particular age.
2. Jesus was a prophet to the Jews.
 - a. The Qur'an affirms his virgin birth (3:45-47), his many miracles (3:49), and his ascension (4:158).
 - b. The Qur'an denies that he is God (5:117) and that he died on the cross (4:157). His substitutionary atonement is also denied.
 - c. According to *hadith* [tradition], signs inaugurating the last days include the prophecy that Jesus will return, take a wife, and have children. During his forty years on earth there will be peace such as has never previously existed. Then he will die and be buried alongside Muhammad. He will be resurrected with everyone else and judged by God.
3. Muhammad is the final prophet of God. He is considered to be the prophet like Moses foretold in Deuteronomy 18:15-18.

Beliefs regarding holy books

Prophets who were also apostles left books for their people.

1. Moses revealed the law (*Tawrat*), David gave us the psalms (*Zabur*), Jesus left us the gospel (*Injil*), and Muhammad left us recitations (*Qur'an*) he received from God through Gabriel.
2. Jews and Christians have their holy books, just as Muslims have the *Qur'an*. The former are known as "people of the book."
3. The *Qur'an* is the highest authority in Islam. It is the earthly version of a heavenly book and the *um-al-kitab* (mother of all books). The *Qur'an* is divided into *surahs* (chapters) and *ayats* (verses), and maintains its authoritative character only in Arabic.

Day of Judgment

On an appointed day known only to God, the trumpet will sound and a general resurrection will follow. The living and the dead will appear before God. In connection with this, Muslims believe that:

1. Man is good by nature.
2. His relationship with Allah is one of submission.
 - a. Sin is rejecting right guidance. Greater sins include all unbelief in Allah and the *Qur'an*, and neglecting essential religious duties. Lesser sins are those resulting in punishment, such as lying, stealing, and insolence.
 - b. The standard for salvation is having a sincere submission to God's will and having one's good deeds outweigh one's bad deeds.
3. Heaven is the reward and hell is the punishment. The *Qur'an* depicts these as places of physical pleasure and torment (56:1-56).

The decrees of God.

1. Allah is sovereign.
2. All that Allah wills comes to pass. Whatever Allah does not will does not happen.

IV. Obligations [deen]

- A. To recite the *Shahadah* [to bear witness] with conviction—"There is no God but God and Muhammad is his messenger [apostle]" [*La-ilah-ill-allah-wa-Muhammad-rasul-allah*].
- B. To pray [*salat*]. A Muslim must perform the ritual prayers while facing in the direction of Mecca five times a day: at sunrise, at noon, in the midafternoon, at sunset, and before retiring. At noon on Friday, Muslims are expected to gather at the mosque.
- C. To fast [*saum*]. This is done during the ninth lunar month, Ramadhan, to commemorate when Muhammad received the *Qur'an*. Muslims must fast from daybreak to sundown. It is expected that this time will cause them to reflect, teach them self-discipline, and underscore their dependence on God.
- D. To give alms [*zakat*]. One-fortieth of one's income is prescribed.
- E. To make the pilgrimage [*hajj*]. If possible, a Muslim should visit Mecca at least once in his or her lifetime. The last month of the Islamic calendar, called *al-hajj*, has been designated as the official period of pilgrimage.

V. Sects of Islam

After Muhammad's death, his followers were divided over who should serve as his successor. The obvious choice seemed to be Muhammad's son-in-law, Ali, who claimed to

be the appointed successor. But the general consensus (*sunna*) was in favor of Abu Bakr, Muhammad's father-in-law. He became the first *khalifah* (caliph), and was followed by Umar and then Uthman. In 656 AD Ali became the first Imam. The twelfth Imam, Muhammad-al-Muntazar, occultated, and is expected by Shi'ite Muslims to re-appear in the end times. From this, two major sects of Islam developed:

A. Sunnis (the majority of Muslims), who believed back then that any successor to Muhammad should be elected. They believe that Islamic principles should be arrived at by the consensus of the elders or religious scholars (*ulami*). Thus, a comprehensive system of community law, *sharia*, has developed. They also hold to a separation between civil and religious authorities.

B. Shi'ites, who believed back then that Muhammad's successor should be through his bloodline, through Ali. They believe that when the twelfth Imam occultated, authority passed on to *ulama*, representatives of the hidden Imam. They also hold that religious authorities exercise both political and religious power.

VI. Sharing the Christian message with Muslims

A. Consult the Bible often to explain and support what you believe. This will expose Muslims to the authority and authenticity of the Bible.

B. Handle your Bible "respectfully." Refrain from placing your Bible on the floor or putting anything on top of it. Use a Bible that has no handwriting or marking in it. If you give a Muslim a Bible or New Testament, do not write in it.

C. Point to Jesus as often as possible without being offensive.

D. Use parables and stories from the Bible, the Qur'an, and everyday life in your discussion. Muslims are more influenced by these than by logical arguments. For example,

1. the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican in Luke 18:9-15. Have Muslims read verses 10-14 and ask them "Which of the two was approved by God?" The answer will be "The Pharisee." Then have them read verse 15. Ask them "Why did Jesus indicate it was 'the Publican'?" Proceed to explain to them the real basis of acceptance before God—His provision and not man's good deeds.

2. The account of God ordering Abraham to sacrifice his son Ishmael in the Qur'an, 37:101-107. Have Muslims read the entire passage and then ask them the following questions: If salvation is a matter of rewarding those who sincerely submit to God's will [which Abraham and Ishmael did], why would there be a need for a "momentous sacrifice?" Who provided this sacrifice? Is a lamb enough to "ransom" humanity from their sins? Share with them that Jesus came "to give His life as a 'ransom' for many" (Mt 20:28). He is the great sacrifice (Heb. 9:26-28), the Lamb of God (Jn. 1:29), and God is the One who sent Him (Jn. 3:16).

E. Share your testimony. Explain how God has worked in your life and what Jesus means to you. Muslims look to religion as being practical.

F. Prepare yourself to respond to objections to the Christian faith (e.g. denial of Jesus crucifixion, charges that the Bible has been changed, Christians worship three Gods, etc.) and to Muslim apologies for Muhammad from the Bible (Muhammad is the prophet like Moses foretold in Deut. 18:15-18, the Paraclete foretold by Jesus in Jn. 14-16, etc.).

1. For example, the Muslim objection to the crucifixion of Jesus. Muslims believe that God would not dishonor his chosen prophet Jesus by allowing him to be crucified. Point out that Jesus predicted his own death on several occasions during His life (Mt. 12:39-40; 16:4, 21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19; 26:2; Mk. 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34; Lk. 9:22, 44; Jn. 2:19; 10:11, 17-18;

12:32-33). Furthermore, it was God who was ultimately responsible for Jesus' death and for His resurrection from the dead (Acts 2:22-23).

Rather than seeing crucifixion as dishonoring Jesus, Muslims should see it as resulting in the greatest honor. Jesus' obedience to death led to God's exalting Him with the greatest honor (Acts 2:29-33; 5:30-31; Phil 2:8-11).

2. For example, the Muslim apology for Muhammad [and not Jesus] as the fulfillment of the prophet like Moses foretold in Deuteronomy 18:15, 18. Muslims claim that the phrase in verse 18 "from their brothers" is a reference to Israel's brother Ishmael, and that Muhammad is a descendent of Ishmael. However, verse 15 clarifies what is meant by this phrase. "From among you" would indicate that this prophet would be an Israelite.

Muslims claim that the phrase "like me" must refer to Muhammad because he was like Moses in many ways. However, many people have been like Moses in many ways: birth, marriage, proclaiming God's words, ruling people, death, etc. It is not the common aspects but the unique aspects of Moses that separate the candidates. Moses saw the Lord "face to face" (Ex. 33:11) instead of receiving revelation through dreams and angels. Moses did great miracles (Dt. 34:10-12). In these things Muhammad is not like Moses at all, but Jesus is.

Some Helpful Resources

A. Books

Cooper, Anne. Compiler. Ishmael my Brother. Kent, England: STL Books, 1985.

Ghaffari, Ebrahim and Marie. Strategies for Sharing the Gospel with Muslim University Students in the U.S. Colorado Springs, CO: Iranian Christians International, 1984.

Hamada, Louis. Understanding the Arab World. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990.

Kershaw, R. Max. How to Share the Good News With Your Muslim Friend. Colorado Springs, CO: International Students, 1990.

McDowell, Bruce A. and Anees Zaka. Muslims and Christians at the Table. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2000.

Miller, William M. A Christian's Response to Islam. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976.

Parshall, Phil. Bridges to Islam: A Christian Perspective on Folk Islam. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983.

Sell, Canon. The Historical Development of the Qur'an. Chicago: People International, n.d.

B. Organizations

Arab World Ministries, P. O. Box 96, Upper Darby, PA 19082.

Samuel Zwemer Institute, P. O. Box 365, Altadena, CA 91001.