

On Islam

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15:15

Today we are on our final World Religion—Islam. While there are 2 billion Christians worldwide, there are 1.3 billion Muslims and Islam is the fastest growing religion. Islam is the youngest of the Abrahamic faiths, and traces its roots back to Abraham and Hagar's son Ishmael, the father of the Arab nation.

Another Arab man is at the heart of Islam, Muhammad who lived from 570-632 C.E. Muhammad was born in Mecca (modern-day Saudi Arabia) to nomadic, tribal, polytheists. Muhammad was orphaned by 6 and grew up to be a shepherd and then took merchants' goods on caravans. He impressed one wealthy tradeswoman, Khadija, because he was so trustworthy. Muhammad and Khadija married in 595 C.E. and had 4 daughters. Life was happy and Muhammad took over the family business, though Mecca became increasingly wealthy, which made him increasingly uncomfortable with all the materialism.

In 610, when Muhammad was forty, he retreated to the mountains outside Mecca to pray when all of a sudden he felt the divine presence. A voice said, "Recite," and words of pure beauty and force came from him. The Qur'an means "the recitation" and Islam means "submission" or "surrender." Muslims believe that the Divine Word was revealed to Muhammad over 23 years and that the Angel Gabriel made him repeat the whole thing to make sure he got it right. In time, Muslims would also have the Hadith, the words of Muhammad. For Muslims, Jews and Christians changed these pure scriptures which accounts for the differences in the Torah, the Bible, and the Qur'an.[1] Muhammad was shaken to his core after these religious experiences. He ran home to Khadija that first time, and she reassured him that the revelation had to be from Allah, Arabic for "the God."

Muhammad begged Allah to find somebody else to be the messenger; he didn't want to tell anyone that Allah spoke to him and that there was only one true God to whose will all must submit. Eventually, he gained courage and a band of converts and they traveled to Yathrib in 622. This journey was the hijra, marking the beginning of the Islamic calendar. Yathrib was renamed Medina "the City of the Prophet," and he remained for 6 years spreading Islam. Muhammad's people and the Meccans had various battles, but in 630 Muslims peacefully conquered Mecca. At the time of Muhammad's death in 632, almost all of the western section of the Arabian Peninsula had converted to Islam.[2]

So what are the main beliefs of Islam? Islam has 5 Pillars of the faith, the first being Shahadah (testimony of faith)—"There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his Messenger." This captures the belief in monotheism, and the central role of Muhammad. Muslims believe that Allah sent Prophets to remind humanity of the divine will and a few prophets received written texts, including Moses, David, Jesus, and Muhammad making them also Messengers. For Muslims, Muhammad is the most important Prophet and Messenger. The second pillar is Salat (worship in the form of prayer.) All believers are expected to pray five times a day facing the holy city of Mecca. The third pillar is Sawm (fasting during the month of Ramadan.) Zakat (alms or charitable giving) is the fourth pillar, where Muslims are expected to give to their fellow believers. Zakat is mentioned 30 times in the Qur'an, often right next to calls for prayer, connecting faith and action for Muslims. Finally, the fifth pillar is Hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime.)

So what do Muslims believe about Allah? Allah is abstract, almost a principle. There are 99 Beautiful Names of Allah, human attributes given to help people comprehend Allah. One of the

most important qualities is mercy. 113 of 114 chapters of the Qur'an begin, "In the name of Allah, the merciful, the compassionate." [3] For Muslims, the biggest sin is shirk, associating something with Allah. This is why Christians believing that Jesus is God Incarnate is foreign or even offensive. For Muslims, Jesus is a respected Prophet and Messenger, but saying that Jesus shares in God's very nature is to associate a created human being with the uncreated Deity in a way that violates the divine unity. [4] Muslims believe that Muhammad got the message right with the Qur'an, just as Christians believe that Jesus got it right with his teachings, just as Jews believe Moses got it right with the Torah. Are we noticing a pattern here?

One unique concept in Islam is Jihad. I took a semester of Islam in college and our professor emphasized that Jihad does not really mean "holy war." Jihad is sometimes referred to as the sixth pillar of Islam, coming from an Arabic root whose primary meaning is "the act of putting forth effort in order to achieve some goal." [5] Not as catchy as holy war, but it means internal spiritual struggle. Jihad speaks to the effort Muslims make to live a holy life. Many passages in the Qur'an stress that war is only appropriate when it's a defensive response to an attack on Islam or Muslims, only then is Jihad of the Sword permitted. Of course, this is what some extremists argue they're doing when they take up arms while other Muslims use the Qur'an and the Hadith to argue against that interpretation. But we have to understand that Jihad is internal spiritual wrestling, there's also Jihad of the Heart and Jihad of the Tongue, not just Jihad of the Sword.

So speaking of wrestling, let's turn to the two branches of Islam—Sunni and Shi'ite. The division dates back to the death of Muhammad in 632. Some backed Abu Bakr, the friend of the prophet and father of one of his wives Aisha—these were the Sunnis, representing 80% of Muslims today. Sunnis rely heavily on the practices of Muhammad and his teachings (the Sunna.) On the other hand, some thought that Muhammad's kin were the rightful successors (specifically Ali, his cousin and son-in-law.) Ali's son (Husayn) and his supporters were killed in 680, which left a mark on Shi'ites who represent 20% of Muslims today. For Shi'ites, the Ayatollahs became reflections of God on earth. Finally, Sufism is the mystical element of Islam. Like mystics in other religions, they engage in practices that allow them to experience God in a highly personalized manner. The most famous Sufis are the Whirling Dervishes who dance to experience Allah. [6]

Like every religion, Islam has a shadowy side. According to Religion Scholar John Hick, "Islam, though calling the faithful to submission to and peace with God, and promoting a Muslim brotherhood that is notably free from color prejudice, has sanctified 'holy wars,' fanatical intolerance, and the barbaric punishments of mutilation and flogging, and still generally consigns women to a protected but narrowly confined life." [7] But we often don't see faithful Muslims praying five times a day or having such deep respect for the Qur'an that they purify themselves before they'll even touch it. Or that Muslims share their wealth with the poor, at least 2.5% of their income, to remind them that their wealth belongs to God. There are many beautiful aspects of Islam.

To summarize where we've been, we can trace Islam back to Abraham and Hagar's son Ishmael, though Muhammad is the founder. Muhammad lived from 570-632 C.E. in modern Saudi Arabia. In time, he helped merchants with caravans and impressed Khadija, his later wife and mother of their 4 daughters. In 610 he retreated to the mountains to escape from the wealth of Mecca and had a religious experience, hearing "Recite." Stunningly beautiful words poured forth and the Qur'an "the recitation" and Islam "surrender" or "submission" was born. He accepted that Allah "the God" needed him, and one day the Hadith, his sayings, and the Qur'an would help Islam spread. Muhammad left Mecca in 622 for Yathrib, marking the start of the Islamic calendar. The city became Medina, the City of the Prophet, though battles occurred and Mecca surrendered peacefully in 630, with Muhammad dying just 2 years later.

The Five Pillars of Islam are: the Shahadah (testimony of faith)—"There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his Messenger," Salat (worship in the form of praying five times a day facing Mecca), Sawm (fasting during the month of Ramadan), Zakat (alms or charitable giving), and Hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime.) For Muslims, Allah is abstract, though there are 99 Beautiful Names of Allah to help people comprehend Allah. One of Allah's most important qualities is mercy, and for Muslims the biggest sin is shirk, associating something with God. This is why Christians believing that Jesus is God Incarnate is hard for Muslims. One unique concept in Islam is Jihad, sometimes referred to as the sixth pillar and meaning internal spiritual struggle. Many passages in the Qur'an stress that war is only appropriate when it's a defensive response to an attack on Islam or Muslims.

Islam has Sunni and Shi'ite branches—the division dates to the death of Muhammad and arguments over who should be his heir. Sunnis represent 80% of Muslims today and rely on the practices of Muhammad and his teachings (the Sunna.) Shi'ites represent 20% of Muslims today, and the Ayatollahs are viewed as reflections of God on earth. Sufism is the mystical element of Islam, and the most famous Sufis are the Whirling Dervishes. Like every religion, Islam has a shadowy side, including war, intolerance, punishments like flogging and mutilation, and consigning women to a protected but narrow life. Though I hope we can see the beauty of Islam. Muslims of deep faith pray five times a day, purify themselves to even touch the Qur'an, and have an obligation to share their wealth with the poor to remind them that their wealth does not belong to them but to Allah, the merciful and compassionate. And that, my friends, is Islam. Amen.

[1] Much of the material for this sermon is from Dr. Juliane Hammer, Islam Class Notes, Elon University, Fall 2005.

[2] Dr. Juliane Hammer, Islam Class Notes, Elon University, Fall 2005; John Kaltner, Islam: What Non-Muslims Should Know; Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet, The Life of Muhammad Timeline, [http://www.pbs.org/muhammad/timeline\\_html.shtml](http://www.pbs.org/muhammad/timeline_html.shtml)

[3] John Kaltner, Islam: What Non-Muslims Should Know, 55

[4] John Kaltner, Islam: What Non-Muslims Should Know, 70.

[5] John Kaltner, Islam: What Non-Muslims Should Know, 119.

[6] "The Economist Explains: What is the Difference Between Sunni and Shia Muslims," May 28, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2013/05/economist-explains-19>

[7] John Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, Eds. The Myth of X Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religion, 29.