

Speaking of...

ISLAM

Islam is the second largest religion in America. Of the world's two billion Muslims, somewhere between four and five million live in the United States. Regardless of where you live, there is a good chance that you will go to school, work, or live near a mosque or a Muslim family—whether you live in a large city or work in a small town. This presents a unique opportunity for Christians, for there has never been a time that so many Muslims have lived in areas of the world where the speaking of the gospel is freely permitted. But before thinking about ways to speak and respond to their objections to the gospel, it is worth getting to know a bit about their worldview.

KNOW THE HISTORY

Islam began 1400 years ago when, according to Muslim tradition, a man named Muhammad (570-632) claimed to be the recipient of messages sent to him from Allah—the Arabic term for God. Few believed him at first. By the 620s, though, he was able to convince, by persuasion and force, the people of the Arabian Peninsula to embrace his message. The message was eventually written down a few decades after Muhammad's death in a book called the Qur'an. This book is the primary source of all Islamic doctrine and is regarded as the eternal and unchanging word of Allah.

UNDERSTAND THE BELIEFS

Islam has five primary doctrines. The first is the doctrine that Allah is one, and he should be the one and only object of devotion in the life of a Muslim. This doctrine is called tawhid. It is expressed daily by Muslims when they say, in the first half of their creed (shahadah), "There is no god but Allah." The second half is, "and Muhammad is his messenger." That is, only Muhammad's message inscribed in the Qur'an is regarded as the word of Allah.

The second essential doctrine of Islam is the belief that Allah is the creator of everything—visible and invisible. The Qur'an speaks frequently of invisible creatures like angels, which do Allah's bidding, and genies (jinn), who can take visible form and often entice humans to sin and cause accidents, disease, and other calamities. It treats the visible or physical world as one that is perfectly ordered and sustained by Allah. Human beings, however, are regarded as those who have gone astray from the intended order of things by succumbing to temptation and willful disobedience.

The third and fourth major doctrines go hand in hand. They are the Qur'an's teachings on prophets and inspired books. While Muhammad is regarded as the prophet, he is believed to be the last in a long line of prophets who preached the message of Islam long before Muhammad. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and many others, including Jesus, are all regarded as prophets, and so too are the books associated with their ministry. The Qur'an lists them: the Torah, the scrolls of Abraham (which have gone missing), the Psalms, and the Gospels.

The last of Islam's five major doctrines is the belief that there will be a last day where every human being will be judged by Allah. Each person's eternal fate is determined by how well he/she obeyed the law of Allah, though tradition will often add an Islamic version of predestination to this, which asserts that ultimately Allah determines how a person chooses to behave and whether they enter paradise or everlasting judgment in hell.

MIND THE DIFFERENCES

There are obviously many terms and teachings in Islam that run parallel to what Christians believe. Christians must be careful, however, for they are just that—parallel. They do not converge. In fact, the Qur'an distances Islam from Christianity quite clearly in several ways. For example, when Islam speaks of God it speaks specifically of the God presented in the Qur'an. This God is one, to be sure, but one in person. There is no room for the belief that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Qur'an regards this basic Christian doctrine as blasphemy and admonishes its readers not to even utter the word Trinity (4:171).

Islam's naming of several biblical personalities as prophets and reverence for the Torah, Psalms, and Gospel can also be misleading. The Qur'an clearly sees the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament as prophets who taught the same doctrine as Muhammad. In fact, Qur'an 19: 27–33 describes the newborn baby Jesus proclaiming to Mary, his mother, that he is a "prophet of Allah."

So how is it that the Qur'an contradicts the message of these earlier prophets? How does Islam explain the manifest differences between biblical and quranic doctrine? The short answer is that Muslims generally believe that books like the Torah, Psalms, and Gospel were at one time reliable scripture, but somewhere before Muhammad's life they were corrupted (tahrif) by scribes and interpreters. For Muslims, then, only the Qur'an is reliable.

The greatest distinction between Islam and Christianity, though, centers on the life and person of Jesus. The Qur'an may distinguish him as one of the great prophets. It affirms his virgin birth and even ascribes miracles to him. But it also denies that He

was crucified, died, and buried. He, therefore, did not rise from the dead. According to 1 Corinthians 15:12–19, this would render Christianity false. And indeed, Islam regards it as such. Qur'an 9:30 goes so far as to curse those who confess that Jesus is the son of God.

WHERE DO WE BEGIN?

In our efforts to reach our Muslim neighbor for the sake of the gospel, a good place to start is with a reminder from scripture: that God the Father sent his Son "for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2)." Additionally, "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself...and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:19–20)." How should Christ's ambassadors approach Muslims?

First, as is the case with all people, it is essential for Christians to get to know and befriend Muslims. Despite our many theological differences, opportunities for friendship abound, for Muslims are increasingly participating in mainstream American society and slowly but surely assimilating into the culture. It is important, however, to learn about the things that might get in the way of relationships with them. By far, the biggest issue has to do with how males and females interact. Generally, men should avoid any sort of physical contact with a Muslim woman and vice versa. It is wise to be aware of the different dietary restrictions in Islam, too. Pork and alcohol are forbidden in Islam and, if served during a meal, may cause undue offense. There are other things, too, and they will vary from Muslim to Muslim. If you are unsure, it is best to simply ask.

Second, it is important to learn how to speak with your Muslim friends. As a rule, it is best not to assume what they think or how they feel about matters important to you. In fact, you will find that the trust and openness of your friendship will deepen if you let them tell you what they think and feel. This is vital for any friendship and is especially the case with Muslims who feel like they have been marginalized and even demonized in America over the last two decades. It is also important to be patient with them. Like any other non-Christian, they have a false understanding of who Jesus was (and is). You may be on opposite sides of political issues. And you will probably disagree on how best to live. That is all to be expected. For the sake of an opportunity to speak the gospel, it is best to remain patient, just as we strive to be patient with anyone else.


Third, Christians should not be timid. God gives us "a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control (2 Tim. 1:7)." And so in the context of conversations with our Muslim friends, we should be listening for opportunities to speak the gospel. There is no blueprint or timeline for this. It will be in

God's time. When it arrives, though, be ready. Be ready to speak the gospel in all its power. It alone has the "power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Rom. 1:16)" and, we might add, "as well as the Muslim." You never know when or how the opportunity will come. It might come during a conversation or in the middle of a personal crisis. You just never know. But be ready to speak the good news—that despite their failures and inability to keep God's law, God has chosen them in Christ, for He sent his son to die for them.


Fourth, get involved with Christian agencies that are fulfilling needs within the Muslim community. Classes in ESL are certainly a big need, as are other classes (especially for the women), to develop helpful skills. Surprisingly, very often Muslims have no issues with attending programs dedicated to them that are held inside a church building.

Lastly, because the gospel is more than words, but words that correspond to and are only true because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, Christians should be prepared for Muslims to respond with questions. Scripture tells us we should "always be prepared" to explain and defend what we claim (1 Pet. 3:15). In the case of Islam, a Muslim may sincerely respond to the gospel by denying the very fact of the crucifixion. In this case, Christians have facts and can build a case for Christianity with them using the tools of apologetics.

There is much more that could be said, and there are plenty of helpful resources available to equip Christians for evangelism and apologetics. Answering-islam.org, acts17.com, and poblo.org are great places to start. Most fundamental to Christian witness to Muslims, though, is our resolve that Jesus died for our sins and the sins of the whole world. This includes the Muslim world. There will be challenges. There always will be so long as the powers and principalities of darkness persist. And yet, God has called and entrusted us to participate in his mission to bring the light of the gospel to our neighbors—even our Muslim neighbors and friends.



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