

Statement: DM809

## UNDERSTANDING AND REACHING MUSLIMS

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(Parts One and Two)

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### PART ONE

As the world's second largest and fastest-growing religion, Islam presents a major evangelistic challenge to Christians, both on the mission field and through the ever-increasing presence of Muslims in Western lands. Since September 11 the importance of Christians individually developing an informed and appropriate response to Islam has been undeniable. The purpose of this two-part series is to provide Christians with a good place to start.

#### *Historical Background*

The founder of the Islamic religion was the prophet Muhammad, who was born in Mecca in the Arabian peninsula about a.d. 570. At age 40, he allegedly received "revelations" through the angel Gabriel (610). Muhammad then preached his message of monotheism and judgment to the polytheists of Mecca, but local leaders denounced him, and he fled to the city of Medina on 24 September 622. This event is known as the *Hijra* (literally, "the Flight"). Muslims use a.h. to mark the time after the *Hijra*.

After winning a series of military battles, Muhammad eventually conquered Mecca in 630. In March of 632, he delivered his farewell message to tens of thousands of followers and died in June of that year. Islam quickly spread throughout the Middle East, across Africa, and eventually into Europe. Were it not for Charles Martel, who defeated the Muslim armies at the battle of Tours (France) in 732, possibly all of Europe would have fallen to Islam. Today, Islam is the second largest and the fastest growing religion in the world. It claims 1.2 billion adherents or one out of five persons on earth; professing Christendom has about 1.8 billion followers.

Although Islam was born in Arabia, today most of Islam's adherents are not of Arab descent. Indonesia has 172 million Muslims, 83 percent of its population; Pakistan has 137 million Muslims, 97 percent of its population; Bangladesh has 107 million Muslims, 87 percent of its population; India has 138 million Muslims, 14 percent of its population. It should be noted that these figures are approximations as no census has been taken in many countries for years or, if they have, they often are distorted for political reasons. Scholars currently disagree widely on how many Muslims live in the United States. A moderate estimate is 4.9 million with African American converts comprising a significant ethnic percentage.<sup>1</sup>

#### *The Five Basic Beliefs*

The term "Islam" means "submission" to the will of God. The person who submits is called a "Muslim," or a submitted one. This submission is manifest in both beliefs (*iman*) and practices (*deen*). The five basic beliefs of Islam are set forth by the Qur'an: "Righteous is he who believes in *Allah* and the *Last Day* and the *Angels* and the *Scripture* and the *Prophets*" (Sura 2:177, emphases added).<sup>2</sup> In our review of these beliefs, two of them — Scripture and the Last Day — call for detailed treatment.

#### **1. Belief in One God (Allah)**

Islam embraces a rigid form of monotheism that confesses only one God whose name is Allah (the Arabic word for "God"). The Qu'ran repeatedly claims that Allah has no "partners." He is one and only one person. Sura 112 declares his "Unity": "Say: He is Allah, the One! Allah, the eternally Besought of all! He begetteth not nor was

begotten. And there is none comparable unto Him.” No plurality within God’s unity is tolerated, particularly the Christian concept of a Trinity (Sura 4:171). God is an absolute singularity, not a compound unity. Any denial of his absolute unity is considered an unpardonable sin (4:48).

Muslims claim Allah has 99 beautiful names, although lists vary. A succinct summary of many of God’s attributes are found in Sura 59:22–24:

*God is He, than whom there is no other god; the Sovereign, the Holy One, the Source of Peace (and Perfection), the Guardian of Faith, the Preserver of Safety, The Exalted in Might, the Irresistible, the Supreme: Glory to God! (High is He) above the partners they attribute to Him. He is God, the Creator, the Evolver, the Bestower of Forms (Or Colours). To Him belong the Most Beautiful Names....And He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise.*

The central attributes of God include his absolute unity, complete sovereignty, mysterious volitionality (will), ultimate equity (justice), arbitrary mercy, and his utter unknowability. Humans cannot comprehend God’s nature or character.<sup>3</sup> Humans can know only the will and commands of God.

Moreover, the Muslim view of God is *voluntaristic*: Something is good because God wills it; He does not will it because it is good in accordance with an unchangeable nature. The Persian poet Omar Khayyam captured this sense of arbitrariness in Allah:

*But helpless Pieces of the Game he plays  
Upon this checquer-board of Nights and Days;  
Hither and thither moves, and checks, and slays,  
And one by one back in the Closet lays.<sup>4</sup>*

## 2. The Belief in Prophets

**The Nature and Number of Prophets.** According to Islam, Allah conveys his message to humankind through prophets. The total number of these messengers from God down through the centuries has been 124,000, one for each nation from the beginning. In Sura 6:84–86, Allah declares, “We gave him Isaac and Jacob: all (three) We guided: And before him We guided Noah, And among his progeny, David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses, and Aaron: Thus do We reward Those who do good: And Zakariya and John, and Jesus and Elias: All in the ranks of the Righteous: and Ismail and Elisha, And Jonas, and Lot” (cf. Sura 4:163–65).

Among the prophets, five or six are considered to be of the highest rank: Muhammad (the apostle of God), Noah (the preacher of God), Abraham (the friend of God), Moses (the speaker with God), and Jesus (the word of God). Some also include Adam (the chosen of God) in the list.

**Jesus Is a Prophet.** It is noteworthy that Jesus is listed as a prophet in Islam, but Muslims deny that Jesus is the Son of God. To affirm Christ is God is considered blasphemous. Sura 5:75 reads: “Christ the son of Mary was no more than an Apostle.” Further, “it is not fitting to (the majesty of) God that He should beget a son” (Sura 19:35). Many Muslims believe Christians embrace a Trinity that resulted from a sexual union between God the Father and Mary, by which Jesus was born.

**The Uniqueness of Muhammad as a Prophet.** Most important to Islamic belief about prophets is that Muhammad is the last of the prophets, although they claim he is not superior to the other prophets, being a mere man and mouthpiece of God like the others. Muslims, however, attribute several unique features to Muhammad. He is considered the sum of all the prophets before him, along with being the last of the prophets. God’s revelation to humankind ceased with him. Finally, he alone left behind these revelations in a Holy Book, the Qur’an, which Muslims consider to be the uncorrupted words of God (see below).

## 3. Belief in Angels

Muslims also believe in angels whom God created. Some angels named in the Qur’an are Gabriel, Israfil, Izra’il, and Michael. Islamic author Alhaj A. D. Ajjjola points out that “to be a Muslim, it is necessary to believe not only in God, in the life hereafter, in the prophets and in the Books of God, but also in the angels of God”<sup>5</sup> (Sura 2:177).

**Jinn.** In addition to angels, God created other spiritual beings called *jinn*. The Qur’an declares, “We created man from sounding clay, from mud moulded into shape; and the Jinn race, We had created before, from the fire of a

scorching wind” (Sura 15:26–27). Again we read, “I have only created Jinns and men, that They may serve Me” (51:56).

The Qur’an also speaks of Satan (*Shatan*), who is also called Iblis. There is debate about his identity. Some Qur’anic evidence seems to point to Satan as an angelic being. We are also told in the Qur’an that angels cannot disobey God, and yet Satan obviously did. Many Muslim theologians therefore have held the opinion that Satan belonged to the species of jinn. His rebellion against God according to the Qur’an was almost simultaneous with the creation of man (see Sura 38:71–77). Satan’s activities are particularly connected to his role as the Chief Deceiver of humankind (35:5; 4:120), leading humanity astray from the straight path of God’s will.

#### 4. Belief in the Holy Books

**The Four Basic Holy Books.** Muslims claim four books to be Scripture: the Law (*Tawrat*) of Moses; the Psalms (*Zabur*) of David; the Gospels (*Injil*) of Jesus, and the Qur’an of Muhammad. Present forms of the first three, however, are considered by Muslims to be corrupted (*Tahrif*) either in manuscripts or interpretation (see Suras 2:42, 85; 3:71, 78; 4:46). The only uncorrupted revelation from God is thus found in the Qur’an.

**The Qur’an.** The word Qur’an means “recitations,” which is based on the angel Gabriel supposedly instructing Muhammad to recite the revelations he received. The Qur’an is slightly shorter than the New Testament.

**The Arrangement of the Qur’an.** It is divided into 114 chapters, called *Suras*, of unequal length. Eighty-six of the chapters were revealed during the Meccan period and 28 at Medina. Each chapter is divided into verses (*ayat*). Every sura (with one exception) begins with a *bismillah*, which is translated into English as, “In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.” Each sura also contains a title, which is often derived from a word or a phrase within the chapter (e.g., “The Cow,” “Jonah,” “The Fig,” and “He Frowned”). In most cases, however, these titles do not indicate the theme of the whole chapter.

The suras are not placed in any chronological or logical order. Generally speaking, the chapters are arranged according to length — with the exception of the first one, which functions as a short introductory prayer.

**The Composition of the Qur’an.** Muhammad referred to himself in the Qur’an as “the Prophet who can neither read nor write” (Sura 7:157). According to Islamic tradition, different fragments of the Qur’an were revealed to Muhammad verbatim by the angel Gabriel over a period of 23 years (cf. Sura 25:32; 17:106). After each occasion, the prophet recited the words of revelation to those present.<sup>6</sup> Many of the devout believers memorized these Qur’anic portions as they were revealed and used them for private meditation or public worship, especially the shorter Meccan suras. We are also told that Muhammad’s scribes wrote the revelations on “pieces of paper, stones, palm-leaves, shoulder-blades, ribs, and bits of leather.”<sup>7</sup>

**The Abrogation of Earlier Revelations.** A unique feature of the Qur’an is the doctrine of abrogation, whereby later revelations can annul earlier revelations. For example, some of the earlier (Meccan) Suras contain a more moderate tone of peace and tolerance toward other religions (e.g., Sura 29:46). Many Muslims believe these verses were superseded by subsequent revelations in later Suras that seem to promote a more hostile attitude toward others.<sup>8</sup> In Sura 2:106, Allah declares that “whatever communications We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, We bring one better than it or like it. Do you not know that Allah has power over all things?” (cf. 16:101).

**The Finality of the Qur’an.** With the death of their prophet, Muslims were convinced that God’s revelations to humankind were completed. As Sura 5:4 puts it, “This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion.” With the death of Muhammad, therefore, the demand for compiling and collecting this final revelation in written form became a pressing concern.

**The Standardization of the Qur’an.** About a year after Muhammad’s death, a great number of those who could recite the Qur’an by memory (*hafiz*) were killed in the battle of Yamamah (633).<sup>9</sup> Some of the companions of Muhammad — mainly due to the promptings of Umar, who later became the second caliph of Islam — ordered the collection of the Qur’an because they feared that the knowledge of the Qur’an might fade away. Zayd ibn Thabit, one of Muhammad’s most trusted secretaries, was appointed to this task. According to Zayd’s testimony, “During the lifetime of the prophet the Qur’an had all been written down, but it was not yet united in one place nor arranged in successive order.”<sup>10</sup>

Some time later, during the reign of the third Muslim caliph, Uthman (644–656), they were faced with the problem that several Muslim communities were using different versions of the Qur'an. With the fear that this might lead to doctrinal confusion, Zayd was called to head the new project of editing an official revised version of the Qur'an. After the production of the revised version, which followed the dialect of the Qur'aish, several copies of this new authoritative Qur'an were sent to each major center of the Islamic empire and all the other copies of the Qur'an were recalled and burned by the express order of the Caliph Uthman.<sup>11</sup> The Uthmanic version of the Qur'an has remained substantially intact to the present day.

**The Nature and Source of the Qur'an.** In an article titled, "The Muslim Lives by the Qur'an," Professor Yusuf K. Ibish provides a helpful insight about the status of the Qur'an in Islam: "It is not a book in the ordinary sense, nor is it comparable to the Bible, either the Old or New Testaments. It is an expression of Divine Will." He contends, "If you want to compare it with anything in Christianity, you must compare it with Christ Himself. Christ was the expression of the Divine among men, the revelation of the Divine Will. That is what the Qur'an is."<sup>12</sup> Ibish goes on to say Muhammad was more like Mary in the Christian tradition. Both were vehicles for conveying the divine to us. Seyyed Hossein Nasr adds pointedly, "The Word of God in Islam is the Quran; in Christianity it is Christ....To carry this analogy further one can point to the fact that the Quran, being the Word of God, therefore corresponds to Christ in Christianity and the form of this book, which like the content is determined by the dictum of heaven, corresponds in a sense to the body of Christ."<sup>13</sup> In brief, whereas in Christianity in the beginning was the Word and the Word became flesh, in Islam in the beginning was the Word and the Word became a book!

The great Sunni authority, Abu Hanifa, affirmed that "the Qur'an is the word of God, and is his inspired word and revelation. It is a necessary attribute of God. It is not God, but still is inseparable from God." He adds, "It is written in a volume, it is read in a language, it is remembered in the heart, and its letters and its vowel points, and its writing are all created, for they are the works of men, but God's word is uncreated"; thus, "its words, its writing, its letters, and its verses are for the necessities of man, for its meaning is arrived at by their use, but the word of God is fixed in the essence of God, and he who says that the word of God is created is an infidel."<sup>14</sup>

**The Place of the Qur'an in a Muslim's Life.** Concerning the place of the Qur'an in the life of a faithful Muslim, Anis Shorrosh notes, "The Quran is held in the greatest esteem and reverence among Muslims as their holy scripture. They dare not touch it without first being washed and purified"; hence, "They read it with the greatest care and respect, never holding it below their waist. They swear by it and consult it on all occasions. They carry it with them to war, write sentences of it on their banners, suspend it from their necks as charm, and always place it on the highest shelf or in some place of honor in their houses."<sup>15</sup>

**The Alleged Miraculous Nature of the Qur'an.** Not only is the Qur'an the ultimate divine revelation, but for Muslims it is also the ultimate divine miracle. The "miracle of the Qur'an" is certainly the most fundamental and popular doctrine about the Qur'an for the majority of Muslims, even more than the doctrine of the eternity of the Qur'an.

From almost the very beginning of his ministry, Muhammad claimed that the Qur'an was his only miracle. In Sura 2:23, the prophet is commanded to say, "And if ye are in doubt as to what We have revealed from time to time to Our servant, then produce a Sura like thereunto; And call your witnesses or helpers (If there are any) besides God, If your (doubts) are true" (see also Sura 10:38). In Sura 17:88, the prophet offers another bold challenge to unbelievers: "Say: 'If the whole of mankind and jinns were to gather together to produce the like of this Qur'an, they could not produce the like thereof, even if they backed up each other with help and support.'"

Muslims have offered other evidence for the miraculous nature of the Qur'an,<sup>16</sup> but the dominant reason is its alleged unique literary style. According to this argument, the Qur'an "is wonderfully arranged, and marvelously composed, and so exalted in its literary elegance as to be beyond what any mere creature could attain."<sup>17</sup> By revelation Muhammad claimed that "this Qur'an is not such as can be produced by other than God..." (Sura 10:37). He boasted that "if the whole of mankind and jinns were to gather together to produce the like of this Qur'an, they could not produce the like thereof, even if they backed up each other with help and support" (Sura 17:88).

## 5. Belief in the Final Judgment (Heaven and Hell)

At the sound of a trumpet, all human beings will be physically resurrected on the Last Day. As for those who deny this, the Qur'an says, "See they not that God, who created the heavens and the earth...is able to give life to the dead?"

Yea, verily He has power over all things” (Sura 46:33). Muhammad adds, “Who can give life to (dry) bones and decomposed ones (at that)? Say, ‘He will give them life who created them for the first time!’” (36:78–79).

Then, writes contemporary orthodox Muslim author, Muhammad Khouj, “when Allah assembles people in His presence, He will begin to judge them on the scale of absolute justice. Everything a person does...including intentions and desires, will be accounted for on this day. At that moment, nobody can help anyone else because a person’s deeds and intention will speak for him.”<sup>18</sup> Khouj adds, “Each individual has two angels — one on his right who records his good deeds and one on his left who records the bad deeds. By Allah’s orders, these angels registered every single act and intention of every human being.”<sup>19</sup> Sura 18:49 declares that “the Book (of Deeds) will be placed (before you); and thou wilt see the sinful in great terror because of what is (recorded) therein; they will say, ‘Ah! woe to us! What a book is this! It leaves out nothing small or great, but takes account thereof!’ They will find all that they did, placed before them: and not one will thy Lord treat with injustice” (cf. Sura 17:13–14).

The final judgment is carried out by the means of a scale (*mizan*), which is used to balance the individual’s good deeds against his or her bad deeds. “Then those whose balance (of good deeds) is heavy, — They will attain salvation: but those whose balance is light, will be those who have lost their souls; in Hell will they abide” (Sura 23:102–3).

**Hell.** The Qur’an is consistent in its emphasis that “the alternative for each individual at the day of judgment are two: the bliss of the garden or the torment of the fire.”<sup>20</sup> Those who successfully cross the *sirat* (the bridge over hell) enter heaven, and those who fall off of it are cast into the abyss of hell. Concerning the torments of hell, the Qur’an declares, “For it is a tree that springs out of the bottom of Hell-fire: the shoots of its fruit-stalks are like the heads O devils...then on the top of that they will be given a mixture of boiling water. Then shall their return be to the (Blazing) Fire” (Sura 37:62–68). Unbelievers will first see hell “from a place far off, they will hear its fury and its raging sigh.” Then, “when they are cast, bound together, into a constricted place therein, they will plead for destruction there and then!” (25:12–13). Furthermore, it has “a fierce blast of fire and boiling water, and in the shades of Black Smoke” (56:42–43). “When they are cast therein, they will hear the (terrible) drawing in of its breath even as it blazes forth, almost bursting with fury” (67:7–8). The people of the fire are sighing, wailing, and wretched (11:106). Their scorched skins are constantly exchanged for new ones so that they can taste the torment anew (Sura 4:45). They drink festering water, and though death appears on all sides, they are not able to die (14:16–17). People are linked together in chains of 70 cubits (69:30–32), wearing pitch for clothing and fire on their faces (14:50). Boiling water will be poured over their heads, melting their insides as well as their skins, and hooks of iron will drag them back should they try to escape (22:19–21).<sup>21</sup>

**Heaven.** Heaven, on the other hand, is usually referred to in the Qur’an as the “Gardens of Felicity” (Sura 37:43). This “is a place where believers find whatever their hearts desire.”<sup>22</sup> In heaven, people will be “facing each other on thrones (of dignity),” and they will drink “from a clear-flowing fountain, crystal-white, of taste delicious to those who drink (thereof).” The faithful are promised the companionship of young and beautiful women, for “beside them will be chaste women, restraining their glances, with big eyes (of wonder and beauty)” (37:48). “They will recline (with ease) on thrones (of dignity) arranged in ranks; and We [God] shall join them to companions, with beautiful big and lustrous eyes” (52:20; cf. also 56:22; 55:72; 44:54). “Rather, they will enjoy gentle speech, pleasant shade, and ever available fruit, as well as all the cool drink and meat they desire. They will drink from a shining stream of delicious wine, from which they will suffer no intoxicating aftereffects” (37:45–47). The faithful will wear armlets of gold and pearls, green and gold robes of the finest silk and embroidery, and will be waited on by menservants (cf. 52:24; 56:17; 74:19).<sup>23</sup> In addition, Sura 9:72 declares, “God hath promised to believers, men and women, gardens under which rivers flow, to dwell therein, and beautiful mansions in gardens of everlasting bliss. But the greatest bliss is the good pleasure of God: That is the supreme felicity.”

### ***The Five Muslim Religious Duties***

In addition to the five basic beliefs, five basic practices, called “the five pillars of Islam,” are enjoined on all Muslims. They include:

**The Duty to Recite the *Shahadah*.** This means to “bear witness,” which is done by reciting the creed, “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger.” Saying this sincerely is all that is necessary to become a Muslim.

**The Duty to Pray (*Salat*).** Muslims are required to say 17 complete prayers each day. They may pray individually or collectively. Following the prescription in the Qur'an, Muslims pray five times a day: dawn, noon, midafternoon, dusk, and two hours after sunset. Once a week, on Friday, they are required to meet in the Mosque to pray.

**The Duty to Fast (*Sawm*).** Muslims commemorate Muhammad's receiving of the Qur'an by fasting in the ninth lunar month of *Ramadhan*. They are expected to refrain from eating food during the daylight hours for this entire month; however, they are allowed to eat and drink from sunset to sunrise during this time.

**The Duty to Give Alms (*Zakat*).** Muslims are obligated to contribute one-fortieth (2.5 percent) of their income. This is given primarily to the poor and needy.

**The Duty to Make the Pilgrimage (*Hajj*).** It is the duty of every Muslim to make a trip to Mecca (in Arabia) at least once in his or her lifetime, provided they are physically and financially able. Each pilgrim must wear a white garment called *ihram*, which eliminates all distinctions of class or status during the *hajj*. The trip usually takes a week or more, sometimes even a month, since it involves visiting several sacred sites. After making the pilgrimage, a Muslim is entitled to be called a *Hajj*.

Islam and Christianity together make up over half of the world's population. Although Islam claims to build on biblical foundations, it is a legalistic system that rejects Christ's role as Savior. In our next installment, we shall examine the relationship between Islam and biblical Christianity. With a basic understanding of Muslim beliefs and practices, we can begin to reach out to Muslims with Christ's love.

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## Notes

- 1 These statistics and the methodology behind them can be found in appendix A, "The Demographics of the Muslim World," Don McCurry, *Healing the Broken Family of Abraham* (Colorado Springs: Ministries to Muslims, 2001).
- 2 All quotations from the Qur'an are taken from A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Translation and Commentary* (Damascus: Ouloom AlQur'an, 1934).
- 3 See Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), chap. 7.
- 4 Omar Khayyam, "Rubaiyat," trans. Edward FitzGerald, in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 3d ed. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1983), 390.
- 5 Alhaj A. D. Ajijola, *The Essence of Faith in Islam* (Lahore, Pakistan: Islamic Publications Ltd., 1978), 71.
- 6 See Nazir-Ali, *Frontiers in Muslim-Christian Encounter* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1987), 124.
- 7 See Sura 73:1-7 and Yusuf Ali's introduction in *The Holy Qur'an*, 12.
- 8 Early Suras come from the Meccan period. Later ones from the Medinan period include 2-9, 13, 22, 24, 33, 47-49, 55, 57-66, 76, 98, 99, 110.
- 9 This was a major battle between the Muslim forces and the followers of a new self-proclaimed Arabian prophet.
- 10 This is found in H. U. Weitbrecht Stanton, *The Teaching of the Qur'an* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1969), 10-11. See also Mohammed Pickthall's introduction to his English translation of the Qur'an.
- 11 Al-Bukhari, *The Translation of the Meaning of Sahih Al-Bukari*, vol. 6 (Al-Medina: Islamic University, 1983), 478-79.
- 12 Taken from Charis Waddy, *The Muslim Mind* (New York: Longman, 1976), 14.
- 13 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1975), 43-44.
- 14 *Kitab al-Wasiyah*, 77, cited by Abdiyah Akbar Abdul-Haqq, *Sharing Your Faith with a Muslim* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1980), 62.
- 15 Anis Shorosh, *Islam Revealed: A Christian Arab's View of Islam* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988), 21.
- 16 See Geisler and Saleeb, chap. 9.
- 17 Al-Baqillani, *Ijaz al-Qur'an*, 38, as cited by Arthur Jeffery, *Islam: Muhammad and His Religion* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), 57.
- 18 Abdullah Muhammad Khouj, *The End of the Journey* (Washington, D. C.: The Islamic Center, 1988), 70.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 72.

20 Jane Smith and Yvonne Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 84.

21 Ibid., 85–86.

22 Khouj, 82.

23 See Smith and Haddad, 88–89.

## Part TWO

As the world's second largest and fastest-growing religion, Islam presents a major evangelistic challenge to Christians, both on the mission field and through the ever-increasing presence of Muslims in Western lands. Since September 11, the importance of Christians individually developing an informed and appropriate response to Islam has been undeniable. The purpose of this two-part series is to provide Christians with a good place to start.

### *Islamic Traditions and Sects*

Islam is divided into two major traditions — Sunni and Shi'ite.

**Sunni.** The Sunnis are by far the largest group, comprising about 80 percent of all Muslims. The division between Sunnis and Shi'ites originally arose over the political dispute as to who should be the first caliph, or successor to Muhammad. Since Muhammad failed to appoint one before he died, the Sunnis contended that his successor should be elected.

**Shi'ite.** The Shi'ites, on the other hand, insisted that he should come from the bloodline of Muhammad. This would have meant that Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, was the only legitimate successor to the prophet. The Shi'ites reject, therefore, the legitimacy of the first three caliphs of Islam and view them as people who deliberately deprived Ali of his divine rights.

The following chart shows the major differences between the Sunnis and the Shi'ites:

#### **SUNNI**

Comprise 80 percent of Muslims  
Believe Muhammad's successors should be elected  
Stress authority of written traditions (Hadith)  
Separate offices of religious and civil authorities

#### **SHI'ITE**

Comprise fewer than than 20 percent of Muslims  
Believe Muhammad's successors should be blood relatives  
Stress authority of pope-like leaders ( Imam)  
Join offices of religious and civil authorities

**Sufi.** The Sufis are the mystical wing of Islam and are found among both Sunnis and Shi'ites. Sufism is the branch of Islamic belief and practice in which Muslims seek a direct personal experience of God and His divine love. The roots of this movement are traced to very early times when many Muslims became dissatisfied with the increasing worldliness of believers and began to protest against the secularization of Islam. To highlight their concern, they took to clothing themselves in the manner of Syrian Christian monks, in cloth made of coarse wool called "suf." On that account, they came to be called "Sufis" in the course of time.<sup>1</sup>

Sufism historically has played a significant role in the spread of Islam. As one noted scholar of Islam points out, "It is thanks to its mysticism that Islam is an international and universal religion."<sup>2</sup> In addition, Sufism produced some of the greatest philosophical and literary geniuses in the history of Islam, such as Rumi, al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd (Averroes), Ibn Sina (Avicenna), al-Kindi, and al-Farabi.<sup>3</sup> Along with the recent rise in radical Islamic orthodoxy, Sufism is also growing.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to orthodox Islam's firm belief in the absolute transcendence of God, in Sufism, "God is in all things and all things are in Him. All visible and invisible beings are an emanation from Him, and are not really distinct from Him."<sup>5</sup> Concomitant beliefs include mysticism and self-deification, both of which are heretical to orthodox Islam.<sup>6</sup>

**Other Minor Sects and Spin-off Religions.** In addition to the major Muslim branches, there are several minor ones. The *Wahhabis*, who live primarily in Saudi Arabia, form a radical and very legalistic wing of the Sunnis. The *Druze* sect is located primarily in Lebanon, Syria, and northern Palestine. The *Alawite* sect is mostly in Syria. The *Ahmadiyahs* are a heretical Muslim group from Pakistan whose founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, claimed to be the promised Mahdi and Messiah. They believe Jesus went to Kashmir after escaping crucifixion and died in Srinagar.

They also deny the virgin birth and sinless nature of Christ, thus eliminating any superiority of Christ over Muhammad. They are the most active Muslim missionary group in the West.

Beyond these major and minor branches, Islam has spawned other religions. *Sikhism* in India is a blend of Islam and Hinduism. Another spin-off is the eclectic religion called *Baha'i*, which boasts the prophet Baha'u'llah and whose followers claim he supersedes Muhammad. Louis Farrakhan's *Nation of Islam* has also been considered heretical by orthodox Muslims, since, along with other heterodox teachings, it claims that Elijah Muhammad (d. 1975) was a prophet after Muhammad's time.

### ***Islamic View of Jihad (Holy War)***

Many Muslims believe jihad is a sixth pillar of their faith. Indeed, one Islamic Hadith (saying of Muhammad) describes it as second only to belief in God. Jihad is the belief that one should engage in a holy struggle to preserve Islam against non-Muslim beliefs. While orthodox Muslims consider jihad a literal, even military, struggle against unbelievers, some more liberal scholars interpret it as a spiritual struggle. Both the wording of the Qur'an and the militaristic life of Muhammad favor an emphasis on the literal understanding of it.

**The Nature of Jihad.** One Hadith declares jihad to be the second highest responsibility of a Muslim: "Allah's Apostle was asked: 'What is the best deed?' He replied, 'To believe in Allah and His Apostle (Muhammad).' The questioner then asked, 'What is the next (in goodness)?' He replied, 'To participate in jihad (religious fighting) in Allah's Cause'" (Hadith of al-Bukhari 1.25).

Both in principle and practice, Islam has used violence to further its religious cause. Allah said in the Qur'an, "I will cast a dread into the hearts of infidels. Strike off their heads then, and strike off from them every finger tip" (Sura 8:12). Such cruel and unusual punishment was commanded also against thieves: "As for the thief, both male and female, cut off their hands. It is the reward of their own deeds, an exemplary punishment from Allah" (5:38).

**The Object of Jihad.** The targets of jihad are those who do not believe in Islam, particularly Jews and Christians. "Fight against such of those who have been given the Scripture and believe not in Allah nor the last day" (Sura 9:29). Again, "O ye who believe! Take not Jews and Christians for friends. They are friends of one to another. He among you who takes them for friends is (one) of them. Lo! Allah guideth not wrongdoing folk" (5:51). Once more, "O' Prophet! Exhort the believer to fight. If there be of you twenty steadfast they shall overcome two hundred...who disbelieve, because they are folk without intelligence" (8:65). Put simply, "Those who believe do battle for the cause of Allah; and those who disbelieve do battle for the cause of idols. So fight the minions of the devil" (4:76).

**The Conditions and Rewards for Jihad.** Muslims usually claim that jihad is done only in self-defense, but if so, then "self-defense" is given a very broad meaning. What were Muslim forces doing sweeping across North Africa and Europe all the way to France, where Charles Martel finally stopped them at the battle of Tours in 732? This was scarcely a defensive action by any acceptable meaning of the term.

The rewards for jihad are believed to be great in this life, and in the one to come. In fact, it is the only way a Muslim can be sure to gain entry into heaven. One Hadith declares, "The person who participates in (Holy battles) in Allah's cause and nothing compels him to do so except belief in Allah and His Apostles, will be recompensed by Allah either with a reward, or booty (if he survives) or will be admitted to Paradise (if he is killed in the battle as a martyr)" (Hadith 1.35). The Qur'an itself says, "Therefore let those who fight in the way of Allah, who sell this world's life for the hereafter; and whoever fights in the way of Allah, then be he slain or be he victorious, We shall grant him a mighty reward" (Sura 4:74).

**Contrasting Jihad and the Crusades.** Muslim apologists often respond to a critique of jihad by pointing out that Christians have acted similarly in the Crusades against them. There are, however, several crucial differences. First, as already shown, jihad is consistent with the teachings of the Qur'an. The Crusades, on the other hand, were not consistent with the teachings of Jesus. In fact, Jesus said to His disciples, "Put your sword back in its place...for all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Matt. 26:52).

Second, jihad is consistent with the example of Muhammad himself, who practiced it in a literal way. The Crusades, however, are contrary to the example of Christ, who forbade retaliation (see, e.g., Matt. 5:38-44).



Third, jihad is a logical outworking of Islam while the Crusades are not biblical. Burning a cross in an act of hatred against another ethnic group, as the Klu Klux Klan has done, may be using a Christian symbol, but it is not a Christian act. Likewise, the Crusades were acts of people who professed to be Christians, but they were not Christ-like acts. Such actions were an illogical outworking of the Christian faith.

Finally, Islam grew by its use of the sword against others. Christianity, by contrast, has grown most by the use of the sword against it. Early Christianity and early Islam are studies in contrast. When Muhammad preached peace and tolerance, he gained very few converts. Only later, after he and his successors had turned to the sword, did Islam spread swiftly across Africa and into Europe. In stark contrast, during the first few centuries when Christianity experienced its greatest growth, it was not only a time without using the sword on others, but it was a time when the sword was used against it by the Roman emperors.

**Jihad Contrasted with Israel's Killing of the Canaanites.** Many Muslims also defend their actions by comparing them favorably with God's commands to Israel to kill the Canaanites. Here, too, they overlook significant differences.

First, the *object* of Israel's command to kill was not morally innocent but morally guilty people. They are described in these vivid terms: "Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants" (Lev. 18:25). When morally innocent persons were found, they were saved (Gen. 18:22ff.). The pagan nations were also given a chance to repent and avoid the consequences. Indeed, God patiently waited over 400 years before He acted against them in judgment (Gen. 15:16).

Second, the *grounds* for God's command to Israel were not religious but moral. By contrast, the Qur'anic jihad involves killing because of an individual's religious beliefs, not because of his or her immoral behavior.

Third, the *scope* of jihad and God's commands to Israel were significantly different. The Old Testament command was to kill only a specific group of people (the Canaanites) at a specific time (in Joshua's day). Jihad is for killing all unbelievers at any time.

Fourth, the *purpose* of the two are also different. God's command to Israel was to cut out the moral cancer in the holy land, where He was calling His holy people to reside so they could set the stage for the redemption of the whole world (Gen. 12:1-3) by producing the Scriptures (Rom. 3:2) and bringing forth the Savior (Gal. 4:4). No other nation was ever called by God to do this (Ps. 147:19).

Fifth, the *nature* of the killings was not natural but supernatural. These were not acts of humans against other human beings, but acts of God against evil people. The fall of Jericho is a case in point (Josh. 6). Not only did God rescue Rahab and her pagan family because of her faith (Josh. 2), but it was He, not Israel, who miraculously destroyed the city. The Israelites were simply instruments of God. God could have, and sometimes did, accomplish His will through natural disasters, such as the destruction of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea (Exod. 14) and the plagues He sent against Egypt (Exod. 4-12). When Israel attempted to do things by their own power separate from God, they failed miserably, as against the small city of Ai (Josh. 7).

Finally, the *confirmation* was vastly different. The Lord confirmed Israel to be the chosen theocratic nation by numerous supernatural events (Exod. 4:12; Num. 16; 1 Kings 18). No such miraculous confirmation was given to Muhammad and Islam (see below).

In brief, the Old Testament killings were acts of God, who is sovereign over life (Deut. 32:39; Job 1:21) and who has the right to take it in any way He deems appropriate. As a theocracy, Israel was simply an instrument in God's hands. The wars were God's wars at a specific time against a specific people for a specific redemptive purpose to benefit all humankind. Neither Muslims nor any other people have been confirmed by God as His chosen means for doing that.

### ***Contrasting Christianity and Islam***

Space does not permit an extended critique of Islamic beliefs. A contrast of basic Muslim beliefs with orthodox Christianity will suffice to highlight the differences.

	<b>ISLAM</b>	<b>CHRISTIANITY</b>
<b>God:</b>	Absolute unity (One Person in one nature)	Plurality within unity (Three Persons in one nature)
<b>Humanity:</b>	Good by nature	Sinful by nature
<b>Jesus:</b>	Merely a prophet Did not die on a cross Did not rise from the dead	Both God and man Died on the Cross for our sins Rose from the dead for our justification
<b>Salvation:</b>	By works	By grace through faith
<b>Bible:</b>	Corrupted	The uncorrupted Word of God

**A Comparison of Jesus and Muhammad.** Another illuminating contrast is the difference between Jesus and Muhammad as represented in the Qur'an and Islamic teaching. It is fascinating to see how far superior Jesus is to Muhammad even from Muslim sources.

<b>JESUS IN THE QUR'AN</b>	<b>MUHAMMAD IN THE QUR'AN</b>
Sinless	Sinful
Virgin born	Not virgin born
Called "Messiah"	Not called "Messiah"
Called "Word of God"	Not called "Word of God"
Performed miracles	Refused to perform miracles
Bodily ascended to heaven	Did not bodily ascend to heaven

**An Evaluation of the Alleged Miracles of Muhammad.** Muslim defenders are quick to point out that in the Hadith, Muhammad performs many miracles superior to those of Christ. Whereas Jesus did only a few dozen miracles, Muhammad is said to have done many thousands. Whereas Jesus fed only 5,000 men, Muhammad is said to have miraculously provided water for 10,000! Despite such claims, there are many reasons for rejecting the alleged miracles of Muhammad.

First, none of them are recorded in the Qur'an.<sup>7</sup> In fact, they are, in general, contrary to the whole spirit of the Muhammad of the Qur'an, who repeatedly refused to do these very kinds of things for unbelievers who challenged him (see Suras 3:181-84; 4:153; 6:8-9).

Second, these alleged miracles follow the same pattern of legendary embellishment as the apocryphal miracles of Christ from a century or two after His death. They lack the factuality and simplicity of contemporary eyewitness accounts.

Third, even among Muslims there is no generally agreed on list of miracles from the Hadith. Indeed, Bukhari, considered to be the most reliable collector, admitted that of the 300,000 Hadith he collected, he considered only 100,000 might be true. Even these he boiled down to 7,275, leading to the conclusion that there were errors in over 292,725 of them! Even the stories accepted by Muslims as authentic, as determined by the *isnad* (or chain of storytellers), lack credibility.<sup>8</sup>

Fourth, there is no one accepted canon for authenticity of these stories by all Muslims. Most Muslims rank their credibility in descending order as follows: the *Sahih* of Al Bukhari (d. 256 A.H.; that is, 256 years after Muhammad's flight in A.D. 622), *Al Sahih* of Muslim (d. 261 A.H.), the *Sunan* of Abu Du'ad (d. 275 A.H.), the *Jami* of Al-Tirmidhi (d. 279 A.H.), the *Suand* of Al Nasa (d. 303 A.H.), and the *Sunan* of Ibn Madja (d. 283 A.H.). Along with these Hadith there were important biographers who related miracle stories, including Ibn Sa'd (d. 123 A.H.), Ibn Ishaq (d. 151 A.H.), and Ibn Hisham (d. 218 A.H.). Even the above six Hadith collections, however, are rejected by Shi'a Islam. They, along with other Muslims, accept the Qur'an as it is.

Fifth, none of these miracle stories fit the nine categories accepted by Muslims for a miracle that can confirm a prophet's claim. In order to qualify as a miracle (*mudjiza*) to confirm the authenticity of a prophet, a miracle needs to (1) be an act of God that cannot be done by any creature; (2) be contrary to the customary course of things in that class; (3) be aimed at proving the authenticity of that prophet; (4) be preceded by the announcement of a forthcoming miracle; (5) proceed in the exact manner it was announced; (6) occur only through the hands of the prophet; (7) in no way disavow his prophetic claim; (8) be accompanied by a challenge to reduplicate it; and (9) not possibly be followed by a duplication by anyone present.<sup>9</sup> By their own standards, none of the miracles of the Hadith have any apologetic value in demonstrating the truth of Islam.

Sixth, the origin of the miracle claims of Islam are suspect. It is common knowledge that Islam borrowed many of its beliefs and practices from other religions.<sup>10</sup> Many scholars have documented this practice.<sup>11</sup> It is not surprising that Muslim miracle claims arise, then, as a result of Christian apologists demonstrating the superiority of Jesus over Muhammad by way of Jesus' miracles. It was only after two Christian bishops (Abu Qurra from Edessa and Arethas from Caesaria) had pointed this out that the Islamic miracle stories began to appear, as Daniel Sahas has documented.<sup>12</sup> Sahas notes that "it is quite interesting that several of these [miracle stories] sound as if they are being offered as responses to such Christians as Abu Qurra, and they bear an amazing resemblance to miracles of Jesus found in the Gospels."<sup>13</sup> Likewise, it was during this polemic that Muslims began to interpret certain events in the Qur'an (discussed above) as miracles. All of this points toward one conclusion: Muhammad's miracle stories lack credibility and therefore have no apologetic value in proving Muhammad was a prophet of God.

### ***Reaching Muslims for Christ***

Muslims have stereotypes of Christianity that hold them back from accepting Christ. Misunderstandings of Christian belief, such as the following, therefore need to be cleared away so Muslims can appreciate what we truly do believe:

**"Christians believe in three Gods."** The oneness of God must be stressed. Verses such as these can be used: Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one"; Exodus 20:3: "You shall have no other gods before me"; Isaiah 45:18: "I am the Lord, and there is no other"; Mark 12:29: "'The most important one [command],' answered Jesus, 'is this: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one...""; 1 Corinthians 8:4: "We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one."

**"God cannot have a Son."** Many Muslims think that Christians believe the Trinity came about through Jesus' being born of a sexual union between God and Mary. Such a belief, of course, is blasphemous, and it is clearly not what Christians believe (see Matt. 1:21; Luke 2:1-7).

**"God would not allow his servant to die on a Cross."** One of the roadblocks in conveying the gospel to Muslims is their belief that God would not allow one of his servants to suffer such an ignominious death as crucifixion. In response, several facts can be pointed out. First, according to Muslims, Allah can do anything He wants. If so, God could allow Jesus to die on a cross. Second, Jesus did not suffer such an ignominious end, for the crucifixion was not the end. He experienced a glorious resurrection.

**The Do's and Don'ts.** There are many do's and don'ts for reaching Muslims for Christ. Several are worth noting here.

**Don'ts.** Don't argue with Muslims. Their culture does not permit them to lose face or lose an argument. Don't be confrontational or provoked to anger. Don't use a marked Qur'an or marked Bible. This is a sign of desecration to them. Muslims never hold their Qur'an below their waist. They try to hold it high and place it in the highest position on the shelf. Don't speak to them in groups. Peer pressure is a negative factor.

**Do's.** Pray with them. They have a strong belief in prayer, and the Christian's personal relationship to the heavenly Father is something Muslims do not have. Speak of Jesus, whom they respect as one of the great prophets. Use the parables of Jesus (such as the Lost Son). They love stories. They are often impressed by the Sermon on the Mount, which puts Jesus in strong and loving contrast to the violent life of Muhammad. Respect their dietary restrictions. Be sensitive to male-female relational boundaries, and especially make sure to dress modestly. Show love to them. An act of kindness, such as escorting them to the store (e.g., if they feel threatened in the current atmosphere), would help build bridges. Some Muslims regard Christians as their enemies and in some Muslim lands Christians are persecuted; this provides Christians an opportunity to provide a practical demonstration of the superiority of the gospel of grace (Matt. 5:38-47; Rom. 12:17-21).

Another helpful way to witness to Muslims is to begin with what Muhammad told the Christians in his day: “Say: O People of the Book! Ye have no ground to stand upon unless ye stand fast by the Law, the Gospel and all the revelation that has come to you from your Lord” (Sura 5: 71). Since many believe the text of the gospel has been corrupted since Jesus’ day, give them a book, such as F. F. Bruce’s *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (InterVarsity Press, 1960) or Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix’s *General Introduction to the Bible* (Moody Press, 1986, chaps. 22–26), to show them the evidence for the Bible’s faithful transmission from the original manuscripts.

Many Muslims have come to faith in Christ. In doing so, they have left the legalistic works-righteousness of the Quran for the full and free salvation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the wake of renewed Christian-Muslim contact, God may be opening doors to this vast and challenging mission field. May the Lord of the harvest richly bless this work!

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### Notes

- 1 Abdiyah Akbar Abdul-Haqq, *Sharing Your Faith with a Muslim* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1980), 168–69.
- 2 John Alden Williams, *Islam* (New York: George Braziller, 1962), 37. Also see Phil Parshall, *Bridges to Islam* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 31–37.
- 3 See Ahmed Dermenghem, *Muhammad and the Islamic Tradition* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press), 74, and Williams, 155–68.
- 4 See the comments of Professor Yusuf Ibish, an authority on Sufism as well as a political scientist, in Charis Waddy, *The Muslim Mind* (New York: Longman, 1976), 151–52.
- 5 Parshall, 53.
- 6 Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273), the most celebrated Sufi poet, wrote, “In the beginning my soul and yours were but one; my manifestation and yours, my vanishing and yours....It would be false to speak of *mine* and *yours*; *I* and *you* have ceased to exist between us.” (See Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981], 135. For brief examples of Sufi poetry, see Williams, 155–68.) This Neo-Platonic belief is called *fanna* (annihilation). One Sufi explains this idea in the following way: “You hear and see nothing but Allah when you have reached the conviction that nothing besides Allah exists; when you recognize that you yourself are He, that you are identical with Him; there is nothing that exists except Him.” (Goldziher, 144.) In order to achieve *fanna*, the Sufi has to endure a lifelong journey through several stages of spiritual development. This spiritual journey must take place under the guidance of a *pir* (the leader of a Sufi order who himself has “arrived” at the ultimate stage of *fanna*); the one who follows a *pir* is called a *murid* (follower).
- 7 Some Muslim scholars claim that Muhammad did different kinds of miracles than what Jesus did, such as predictions and producing miraculous revelations. Unlike the Bible, however, no specific and long-range predictions are in the Qur’an, and even the short-term ones are ambiguous or disputed. (See Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993], chap. 8.) There is, moreover, nothing supernatural about producing a great work of art or literature. If there is, then Muslims would have to acknowledge that the works of Mozart and Shakespeare were from God as well. Finally, the fact that Muslims defer to these alleged “miracles” is an acknowledgement that Muhammad did not do any truly supernatural feats of nature such as those Jesus did.
- 8 See Joseph Horowitz, “The Growth of the Mohammed Legend,” *The Moslem World* 10 (1920): 49–58.
- 9 See “Mudjiza” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1953).
- 10 See Ali Dashti, *Twenty-Three Years: A Study of the Prophetic Career of Mohammed*, trans. F. F. C. Bagley (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), 55.
- 11 See Anis A. Shorosh, *Islam Revealed: A Christian Arab’s View of Islam* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988), 138–59 and Gerhard Nehls, *Christians Ask Muslims* (Cedar Grove, NJ: SIM International Life Challenge, 1987), 96–102.
- 12 Daniel J. Sahas, “The Formation of Later Islamic Doctrines as a Response to Byzantine Polemics: The Miracles of Muhammad,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Summer-Fall 1982, 312.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 314. For example, Muhammad’s ascension into heaven resembles Jesus’ ascension (Acts 1). Changing water into milk is like Jesus’ transforming water into wine (John 2). Muhammad’s alleged miraculous feedings also resemble Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand (John 6).