
ISLAM 101 | *A Primer*

Despite the fact that Islam is a staple of the evening news these days, and that many Americans work with or live near Muslims, a significant number of us still don't know much about the basic tenants of the religion. A better grasp of Islamic history and teaching will help American Christians break down the walls of misunderstanding, and facilitate our calling to bear witness to Jesus Christ.

A QUICK HISTORY

Muhammad was born in A.D. 570 in Mecca, an important trading town in what is now Saudi Arabia. He was orphaned when he was only six and was raised by his uncle, Abu Talib, a merchant who worked along the trade routes.

At the time, pagan worship dominated Arabia. An estimated 360 gods and goddesses had to be appeased, and over 124,000 known prophets led followers in a variety of directions. Muhammad likely had incomplete and erroneous exposure to Christianity, living well before the first Arabic portions of the Bible.

At 25, Muhammad married Khadija, a wealthy widow. Together they had six children, although only the youngest daughter, Fatima, survived to bring him male descendants. His marriage enabled Muhammad to focus on meditation and prayer in the hills and caves near Mecca.

During one of these times in 610, Muhammad began to receive what he believed were revelations from the angel Gabriel. Although bewildered at first, Muhammad was encouraged by his wife and others, who were impressed by the poetic Arabic of his recitations. These revelations continued over a period of 22 years and form the basis of the Qur'an.

Muhammad proclaimed that the Qur'an was the eternal and final revelation of God, a perfect copy of the text in heaven. Moreover, he declared all previous Scriptures had been superseded by the Qur'an, and they remain largely ignored to this day.

Muhammad attracted many followers, who considered him a prophet. However, he quickly met opposition for his rejection of the idolatrous practices of his culture. In 622, he and 70 followers left Mecca for Medina, where he was warmly welcomed and established a government. Not much later, he developed a strong religious community and an army of 10,000, which in turn conquered Mecca. After Muhammad died in 632, his successors went on to conquer the region and firmly establish Islam.

BASIC BELIEFS

Every Muslim (literally, "submitted one") is expected to demonstrate his obedience by adhering to these Five Pillars:

1. *Shahada*—The recitation of Islam's central confession of faith, "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet."
2. *Salat*—Devoted Muslims face toward Mecca and pray at five set times a day.

3. *Sawm*—Fasting during daylight hours of the month of Ramadan.
4. *Zakat*—Giving to the poor, the mosque, or an Islamic fund.
5. *Hajj*—Muslims are required to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime, unless prevented by poor health or poverty.

Beyond fulfilling these duties, Muslims are deeply affected by the example of Muhammad, whose life is seen as the most noble of all. Indeed, the Qur'an encourages Muslims to model their lives after his, and it is not unusual to find devout Muslims seeking to imitate Muhammad in the smallest details. Islam is not simply a religion; it is a way of life, with Muhammad at the center. Thus, even non-practicing Muslims are profoundly influenced by the life of Muhammad, and hold him in high esteem.

However, the supreme authority in orthodox Islam is the Qur'an, viewed as the final and eternal word of God. In contrast to the Bible, the emphasis in the Qur'an is not on the person of God, but on His will. Because God is completely unknowable, the Qur'an reveals only His commands, which must be followed to gain salvation. In Islam, God is not to be known, only obeyed.

In practice, many Muslims find God's demands overwhelming and obedience hopeless, and so they only occasionally practice the five pillars. Others scrupulously try to submit to God in every aspect of their lives. Even though a Muslim might faithfully obey God's commands, there is still no assurance of salvation. On the Day of Judgment, Muslims believe that Allah (or an angel) will weigh their deeds on a balance, determining if their good deeds outweigh the bad. But even then, Allah decides as He pleases, and not according to a standard of justice. This uncertainty of one's relationship to Allah characterizes every dimension of his life.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

These resources are available from the Presbyterian Church in America's Christian Education and Publications bookstore at www.pcanet.org/cep or 1-800-283-1357.

INTRODUCTORY

- McDowell, Bruce A. and Anees Zaka. *Muslims and Christians at the Table*. Nutly, NJ; P&R, 1999.
- Poston, Larry A. with Carl F. Ellis, Jr. *The Changing Face of Islam in America, Understanding and Reaching Your Neighbor*. Camp Hill, PA: Horizon Books Publishers, 2000.
- Saal, William J. *Reaching Muslims for Christ*. Chicago, IL: Moody, 1993.
- McDowell, Bruce A. and Anees Zaka. *Muslim and Christian Beliefs: A Comparison*. Christian Literature Crusade, 2001.

INTERMEDIATE

- Geisler, Norman L. and Abdul Saleeb. *Answering Islam: The Crescent in Light of the Cross*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002.
- Love, Fran, ed. *Ministry to Muslim Women: Longing to Call Them Sisters*. William Cary Library Publishers, 2003.
- Zaka, Anees. *Ten Steps to Witnessing to Muslims*. Church Without Walls, 1998.

ADVANCED

- Woodberry, Dudley, ed. *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road: Crucial Issues in Witness Among Muslims*. Missions Advanced Research, 1989.