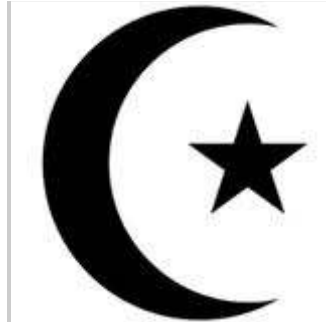


Bridges to the Great Religions of the World

Islam



Pastor Rich Knight
Trinitarian Congregational Church
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James 4:7-10 (please take note of the first word in this passage)

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

Islam is a hard religion for many if not most Americans to appreciate. The faces of Islam that we see are often extremist. The voices of Islam that we hear are often filled with hate for America. Yet Islam is the second most popular religion on the planet, and the fastest growing. So let's see what we can learn.

Christianity has the cross as our symbol. Judaism has the star of David, and Islam has the crescent moon as its symbol. The symbol actually predates Islam, and is therefore a bit controversial. It was the symbol of Ottoman Empire. And as the people of the empire became Muslims, it became the symbol of Islam. Some reject it as the symbol of Islam' yet other countries have it on their flag - Turkey, Pakistan & Lybia.

Some basic vocabulary:

The word "Islam" means "submission" - submission to God.

A Muslim is literally "one who submits" to God.

A Mosque is literally a "place of prostration." Services are held daily, but the most important service is Friday at noon. Mosques are very simple inside, with very little furniture. They use prayer mats on the floor to pray. Men & women pray in separate places, so that the men are not distracted. Washing - there is often a fountain or pool, or at least an area with water where people can wash. Before prayer Muslims wash their hands, mouth, throat, nose, ears, arms up to the elbow and feet. This is a sacred wash that symbolizes spiritual cleansing in preparation for meeting God in prayer.

Allah is simply the Arabic word for God. "The God." Arab Christians would also use the word, Allah for the God of the Old and New Testaments. Muslims credit Abraham with being the first monotheist. They question Christians monotheism because of the Trinity. 3 in 1 isn't one to a Muslim. They also don't believe that the God of the Universe could be incarnate in human form.

By the Numbers:

Approx. 1.5 bil. Muslims worldwide.

Approx. 6 mil. in US. Over 1200 mosques in US.

Like Christianity it is a missionary religion. Judaism isn't.

It's also the fastest growing of the great religions.

In 1900 35% of the world's population were Christian. Today 33% are Christian.

In 1900 12% of the world's population were Muslim. Today 22% are Muslim.

85% of Muslims are Sunni Muslims.

15% are Shiite Muslims.

There is of course a great deal of conflict between Sunnis and Shiites. They each hold their beliefs so strongly that it becomes hardened with intolerance. Christians have certainly struggled with this same issue time and time again. Shiites believe Muhammad's successor should have been Ali, his son-in-law. Sunnis were those who believed Muhammad's successor should be elected by the people. That may seem silly to us but we have the same thing in our history. During the Protestant Reformation Martin Luther had a series of talks with another major reformer, Ulrich Zwingli. They discussed 13 topics and agreed on 12 of them, and then

parted ways.

Here's an important statistic: only 25% of Muslims are Arab. Most Muslims do not live in the Middle East, And most Muslims are not Arab. Countries with the most Muslims: Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India. Notice that none of these are in the Middle East, and none of them are Arab. Islam is the fastest growing religion in Europe. Muhammad is the 3rd most popular name in England - behind Jack & Oliver.

Muslims have been a vital part of European History since the 7th C. Algebra came from Islamic mathematicians. Greek philosophy, science and medicine all preserved by Islamic scholars during the Middle Ages. Muslims took part in many of the Spanish voyages to the New World. Some estimate that 20% of the slaves brought to No. America were Muslims.

Let me tell you about the founder of Islam, Muhammad.

Muslims wouldn't say it that way. They'd say God founded Islam. And that Adam, Abraham, Isaac & Jacob were all Muslims - they all lived by the eternal laws of God. The Prophet Muhammad ("peace be upon him" - Muslims say this every time they mention his name) was born in Mecca approx. 570 AD. Mecca is in Saudi Arabia. At age 40 (around 610 AD) he began a series of mystical experiences, believed to be visited by the Angel Gabriel, felt called to proclaim the word of the one, true God. Mecca was a city of idol worship, materialism and a neglect of the poor. Muhammad's message was rejected in Mecca. He fled to Yathrib, later renamed, Medina, meaning, "City of the Prophet." In 622 he organized an exodus of his followers, out of Mecca to Medina. This year, 622, marks the first year on the Muslim calendar. Muhammad established a community of followers governed by Islamic law in Medina. Later he captures Mecca and rids it of idols. Shortly after captured Mecca Muhammad died in 632.

The Qur'an or Koran is the sacred scripture of Islam. Qur'an literally means, "recitation." It is about the length of the New Testament. During Muhammad's time in Mecca & Medina it's believed that he received many divine visitations during which the Qur'an was dictated to him. It is believed to be literally the Words of God in Arabic. Arabic is the only authoritative language. They believe it to be literally God's Words. That's why burning it is an abomination. Burning God's words - that's a slap in the face to God and to true believers. (Christians

certainly call the Bible "God's Word" but most Christians tend to acknowledge cultural influences and the authors' unique perspectives.)

Similarities

Muslims consider Jews & Christians to be, like them, *"People of the Book."* *"Don't quarrel with People of the Book," says the Qur'an.* They believe in one God (monotheism), angels, prophets, Judgment Day. There were many prophets before Muhammad including: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Job, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Jonah, John the Baptist, and Jesus. (Of course our Bibles don't call all of the above "prophets." Most are considered "patriarchs." Solomon and David were kings. And of course, Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. It is fair to say however that they all were in some way spokesmen for God, and therefore in that way, prophetic.) They affirm Jesus' virgin birth. In fact, the Qur'an mentioned the Virgin Mary more than the New Testament. Muslims believe that Jesus was a great prophet but they believe that Muhammad surpassed him. In the same way that Christians claim that Jesus got to the heart of Judaism and built something better upon it, Muslims believe that Muhammad took Judaism and Christianity and then built something better upon it. Which gives me new empathy for how the Jews must feel when we talk about Christianity fulfilling Judaism.

The Five Pillars of Islam

1. Reciting the Creed (Shahada)

"There is no God but God and Muhammad is his prophet." This is the creed of Islam. The way to become a Muslim is simply to confess this creed sincerely in the presence of another Muslim. Note how similar it is to the Sh'ma Israel - "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one."

2. Praying 5 times a day (salat)

They're very active and physical when they pray. They pray with their bodies & not just their words. They stand, bow, prostrate, sit, repeat. They pray facing Mecca. Because of their faithfulness in prayer evangelical Christian missionaries have had little success converting Muslims. There's a lesson there for us and for sharing the faith with our children. For our faith to be strong our spiritual practices need to be consistent, regular and have an intensity of focus and meaning.

Here is the most famous prayer in Islam. It's essentially the Lord's Prayer of Islam. It's known as the Fatiha, from the Quran.

"In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Praise belongs to God, Lord of all Being, the All-merciful, the All-compassionate, the Master of the Day of Doom. Thee only we serve: to Thee alone we pray for succour. Guide us in the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed; not of those against whom Thou art wrathful, nor of those who are stray."

3. Almsgiving (zakat)

Muslims are to give 2.5% of their wealth yearly to God (excluding house, car, clothes). Quran specifically commands Muslims to care for the blind, the lame, the sick, the poor, the orphan & the captive.

4. Fasting (sawm) - during the 30 days of Ramadan, sunrise to sunset

5. Making a Pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj)

*According to Islam,
The Human Problem = Pride
The Solution = Submit to God, Practice Islam*

Idolatry is a huge sin in Islam. Muslims do not depict God in any way. But they also believe in another form of idolatry that must be wrestled with and defeated. Muslims believe that we make an idol of ourselves, when we live only for ourselves. We make an idol of ourselves when we live as if we don't need God.

There's a saying at the heart of Islam. It's something Muslims say to one another. It's this: *"So have you surrendered?"* Are you in a state of pride? or are you surrendered? Another way they'll ask it is: *"Are you prostrate or are you proud?"*

In the Christian New Testament, James 4 says: *"Submit yourselves to the Lord Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up."*

Submission is at the heart of Christianity as well. It's central to conversion and essential for spiritual growth and maturity. *"Submit yourselves to the Lord."* Yield your will to the will of God. Lay down your pride and serve the Holy One.

"So have you surrendered?"

This is what it means to call Jesus "Lord"? There's a phrase in our UCC worship book - *"Lord and Savior."* At adult baptisms & confirmation we ask: *Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?* There's a question we ask our new members - *"Do you reaffirm your faith in God as your Creator, in Christ as your Lord and in the Holy Spirit as your strength?"* To call Christ our Lord is to call him our Leader above all others. It does have within it the concept of master or king. It's my leader above all, the One I pledge my total allegiance to.

"Have you surrendered?"

My pastor was sitting in the local town diner one day. We called it his second office. He overheard one of the waitresses say to the other, "Well, you're the boss." To which the waitress replied, "I don't know why they call me the boss. They never do what I say."

Jesus once said to some of those who called upon him: *"Why do you call me 'Lord' and do not do what I say?"* To be submitted to God is to do what he says. It's to place God at the center of our lives. It's to place spirituality and faith as front-burner issues in our lives, not the thing we do when we have some extra time.

So this is the question for each one of us today: *Have you surrendered?*

Think about it.