

## What Can Christians Learn from Muslims?

Genesis 21: 1-20; Matthew 22:37-40

### I. THE HISTORY AND MAKE UP OF ISLAM

Muslims, Jews, and Christians all trace the origin of their faith to Abraham. Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were old and childless. At Sarah's request, Abraham has a son with Hagar, Sarah's slave. In this way, the boy was legally considered to be Sarah's son. And we think surrogate parenting is a new concept!!

When Sarah, Abraham's wife, becomes pregnant, she has Abraham send Hagar and her son, Ishmael, into the desert of Beersheba. When it looked as though these two would die of thirst; an angel of the Lord revealed a well of water to Hagar. Then God made a promise, "I will make Ishmael into a great nation." According to Muslims, that great nation is Islam. And, of course, Jews and Christians share their faith origin of Abraham through Sarah's son, Isaac and then Jacob (Israel).

Mohammed was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, in the year 570 of the Common Era. Mohammed's name means "highly praised." Mohammed was the founder of Islamic faith, the youngest of the world's five major religions. Discontent with his life, Mohammed began retreating to a cave in the

mountains to meditate and pray. It was during one of these retreats, when Mohammed was 40 years old that he received his first revelation from God. These revelations continued until his death twenty years later.

These revelations became the Quran; God's final, complete and universal revelation of a faith that was given by prophets of many different times and places. These previous revelations have all been changed or corrupted over time. As such the Quran is the final unaltered revelation from God, known most often, but not always by the Arabic word, Allah.

Like all religions, Islam is not monolithic. There are different groups or denominations of Muslims, just as there are different groups or denominations of Jews and Christians. It is not possible to understand the situation in Iraq, Iran or Afghanistan without understanding the differences between the Sunni, (80% + of all Muslims) and the Shia (10-15%+ of Muslims). Without going into a lot of detail, Iran's population is mostly Shia; Iraq's people are a mix of Sunni and Shia.

Afghanistan's population is primarily Sunni.

Unfortunately, the focus on the Islamic Terrorist group known as the Taliban has caused a widespread perception that all Muslims are terrorists, no matter what they say about themselves.

In Islam, all believers are “required” to practice the five pillars of Islam. These pillars include:

A. THE CREED OR BELIEF:

"There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet." This basic creed is to be repeated in prayer and acknowledged daily. The basic characteristics of God/Allah in Islam include: Allah is creator and all powerful; Allah is merciful and Allah will hold us all accountable.

B. PRAYER:

Muslims pray five times a day facing Mecca, heads bowed all the way to the ground, prostrating themselves before God as a method of being reminded that God is God and that humanity is not.

C. FASTING:

Once a year, for the entire month of Ramadan, adult healthy, adult Muslims are to fast from dawn to dusk. The lunar cycle is the basis for the Jewish and the Islamic calendar, so Ramadan can be during a time when the days are long or short.

D. CHARITY:

Two and a half percent of all one's assets are to be given to the poor and needy. At first that didn't seem like so much. After all, the standard for Christian giving is the tithe or 10%.

But for a Muslim, this isn't 10% of their annual income. No, it is 2.5% of their ASSETS given to the poor and needy PER YEAR! And this is to be given directly to the poor and the needy, not to the institutional church or denominational bureaucracy, or for pastoral salaries.

#### E. PILGRIMAGE:

Muslims are to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime if they are physically able. And of course, this is perhaps one pillar that not everyone is able to accomplish.

### III. HOW CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS DIFFER

#### A. THE QURAN:

There are 114 books of God's revelation to Mohammed. The only true copies of the Quran are those printed in Arabic. Translations are used, but they are considered commentary, not scripture. Islam sees the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures) as given to the Jews. The New Testament (Christian Scriptures) was given to the Christians. The Final Testament (the Quran) was given to Mohammed for all humanity and for all time. In the Muslim's understanding the Quran is the word of God as dictated only to Mohammed.

#### B. JESUS CHRIST:

There is much in the Quran about Jesus. It proclaims the virgin birth, but denies the crucifixion; therefore, there is no

need for resurrection. One person, having converted to Christianity from Islam had this to say about Christians. As a Muslim, he believed that every Christian hated every Muslim. That idea grieves me! But I would also say that many Christians are also misguided enough to believe that every Muslim hates every Christian.

One of the reasons I find this so sad is that there is one very basic common theme that can be found in the Hebrew Scriptures, in the Christian Scriptures and in the Quran. That one single theme could become the basis for mutual respect and acceptance for Christians, Muslims and Jews.

In 2007, 138 Islamic leaders and scholars co-signed an open letter titled, "A Common Word between Us and You." The open letter was part of the Islamic follow-up to Pope Benedict's negative words about Islam in 2006.

In this open letter these Islamic personalities articulated the one most important common teaching that is shared among the three monotheistic faiths of the world. It should not surprise us that this COMMON WORD is what we call the Greatest Commandment. In Matthew 22:37 – 40, Jesus is quoted as saying, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love

*your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

I wonder what our world would look like if every Christian, every Muslim and every Jew decided to love God and love others, no matter what faith they claim. I wonder? I want to touch on just one other difference Christians have with Islam.

#### C. JIHAD (Holy War):

In the greater sense, Jihad is a battle against the enemy within. Nationally, Jihad has been interpreted in some Islamic countries as a means of self-defense, to be declared by the chief of state, much like the Just War Theory promoted by the United States. It is almost exactly the same.

But Muslims have their extremists. Let's not forget that Christians do too. In February 1998, Osama Bin Laden and four other leaders of radical Islamic groups in various countries issued a fatwa, or religious ruling, calling for Jihad against the Crusader-Zionist Alliance. In part it reads, "In compliance with God's orders, we issue the following fatwa to all Muslims: Killing Americans and their allies, civilians and military, is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it." For most Muslims, in this country and around the world, this is seen as something awful. I might say that this fatwa is as distasteful to most Muslims as

are the actions of Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church as they picket churches and military funerals with their messages of hatred.

A Muslim sent this email to a Christian some time ago. He knew this person was urging other Christians to respect people of other faiths. This is what was in the email: "As a Muslim, I am ingrained to believe that to love God is to love mankind so all God's creation can be revered and respected. Thanks for trying to remove misinformation that taints people's hearts with hatred."

I'd like to think that I am energized by loving God and other people. Because I know that I often fail, I will continue to pray "our" prayer. Join me. *God, help me see what you want me to see. Jesus, help me love myself and others as you want me to love. Holy Spirit, help me live in the power of faith, in the optimism of hope and in the joy of love. Amen.*