

Religions of the World – Part III – Islam

I feel that out of all of the religions in the world, Islam is probably one of the most important ones for us to learn about besides Christianity or maybe Judaism.

In today's world we constantly see on the news how there are huge clashes between different religions, and we simply don't understand why.

If there is ever going to be peace in this world, we need to understand each other's religions.

Today we will look at Mohammad, the founder of Islam and look at some distinct differences between our two religions.

Mohammed was born in 570 AD in Mecca – which is modern day Saudi Arabia.

His early life was full of tragedy. His father died before he was born, his mother died when he was 6 – then he went to live with his grandfather who died shortly after that – so Mohammed was raised by his uncle.

Mohammad's family was poor – Mohammad never learned how to read or write. But his family was well respected.

Now let me tell you about Mecca in those days. It was a bustling town. It was a hub for trade and also it was a center of pagan worship.

In the center of town was something called the Ka'bah – which was basically a cube 40 feet high by 40 feet wide by 30 feet deep.

Every tribe had its own gods, and they would all come to Mecca to worship their gods at this cube and offer sacrifices. The worship wasn't always holy or spiritual. For those familiar with the Apostle Paul, you could say it was a lot like Corinth was in Paul's day.

Out of all of these tribes of people worshipping multiple gods – there were two groups in Mecca that didn't worship all of those gods and tried to live a life that was holy. They were called Christians and Jews. They were a small percentage of the people in Mecca during this time, but Mohammed found himself drawn to them and their teachings and Scriptures.

For these people - Christians and Jews - there was only one God. Which, he was called in Arabic – Al illah or “the God” – which was often condensed to “Allah.” Which simply means, God.

As Mohammed grew up and learned more about the Jews and Christians, he became a man of deep spirituality and people trusted him. They would say that he was a man of his word.

When he was 25 he got married to a 40 year old widowed woman and was in charge of her business. They had six children: two boys and four girls. However the boys died while they were still infants.

Mohammed believed that there was only one true God and it really bothered him to see of the pagan worship happening in Mecca.

Looking for a good place to pray and meditate, he found a cave in a mountainside overlooking Mecca. He used this cave often for prayer and meditation.

When Mohammad was 40 he had a profound experience in the cave. While he was praying he fell asleep and had a dream where he saw the angel Gabriel.

The angel Gabriel held out a parchment with writing on it and he said, "Mohammed, read this."

Of course Mohammed said he couldn't read but the angel said it again, "Mohammed, read this" – pressing it towards him.

Of course Mohammed gave the same reply – that he couldn't read.

So the angel said it again, "Mohammed, read this" and pressed the parchment so hard against Mohammed's chest that Mohammed thought he was going to die.

Mohammed woke up and realized that the words that were on the parchment were written on his heart.

Mohammed went back to his wife and said, "I've either seen a demon, or I've seen an angel, or I'm losing my mind – I don't know which."

But over the next 23 years of his life, he would have visions like this over and over again to which he believed that the angel Gabriel was communicating God's will to him.

Mohammed would awake from dreams and share God's word with the people of Mecca, and his very small band of believers would write down the words he shared.

He told the people of Mecca unpopular things like – There is only one God – stop worshiping these pagan idols or you'll face judgment.

Obviously that didn't increase his popularity in a pagan town like Mecca.

Then tragedy hit Mohammed again – his wife died and a group of people from Mecca were trying to kill him because he kept preaching about only one God and that was threatening to the established norm of worshiping many idols.

Around that same time, a city two hundred miles away contacted Mohammed to come and be one of their rulers. They had heard about his leadership and organization skills.

So Mohammed and his small group of followers went to Medina in 622 AD and they set up the first Islamic state; the only religion where only Allah could be worshipped. According to Muslims – 622 AD is when the rule of Allah began and their calendars start at that time.

Mohammed became a political ruler and judge over the city and he was the leader over their army.

At this time his visions began to change. Before they were purely theological – now Gabriel told Mohammed what God considered right and wrong, how to rule, and how to lead an army and wage war.

Mohammed became a warrior. He led his army into battles against surrounding towns as they sought to expand their power and to expand the rule of Allah.

They even went to war against Mecca – with mixed success for several years until a decisive battle where Mohammed's troops defeated the Meccan troops.

As a result, Mohammed returned to Mecca as its ruler. One of his first acts was to destroy all of the idols and consecrate the ancient shrine to the worship of Allah.

In 632 AD he died. All of his followers collected everything that had been written down that Mohammed said and put them together in a book we know as the Quran.

That, in a nut shell, is how Islam got started. Now let's take a couple of minutes and look at their beliefs.

First and foremost, Christians, Muslims and Jews all have the same intent to serve the same God. Again, the word, Allah, is nothing more than the Arabic word for God. Clearly, Mohammed was looking to serve the God of Abraham, the same God Christians and Jews serve.

If a Christian is living in a country speaking Arabic, he will say Allah. The Jews still do today when speaking Arabic. All three religions intend to worship the same God.

Secondly, Muslims believe that during those 23 years of visions Mohammed had, that they were the very words of God – spoken to Mohammed by the angel Gabriel. Those collected words became known as the Quran – which translated means recited word – because Mohammed couldn't read or write, he just recited the words given to him.

Everything Muslims believe come from this book.

Compared to our Bible, the Quran is about 20% shorter than our New Testament. And the style and content is much different.

As Christians, we believe that humans wrote the words in our Bible; humans that were inspired by God. Our Scriptures are primarily words, stories, poems, and letters about God. Paul, not God, wrote his epistles. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – not God – wrote the Gospels. They were all inspired by God – but humans did the actual writing.

By contrast, the Quran is written in the first person – as if God were speaking directly to you or to Mohammed. For example it might say, “We say to you, Mohammed, do this...” or “Human beings, don’t you understand?”

Also, for Muslims, the Quran is only a true Quran if it is in Arabic. This book is held in the highest esteem. You would never sit it on the floor or on a coffee table just to collect dust.

Most of us would be shocked at many of the stories in the Quran because we would recognize them. There are stories about Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jonah, Jesus and John the Baptist. There is an entire chapter about Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Now, not all of the stories match up exactly with our Bible, and if you ask a Muslim, they would say that where the Quran disagrees with the Christian Bible, the Quran is correct because the Quran corrects the corruptions of the Jews and Christians.

Now in the Islamic faith, the Muslims have five distinct obligations.

The first is Belief. According to Islam, the most important part of being a Muslim is confessing your faith. There is one simple faith statement that they must believe: “I bear witness to this truth. There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet.” If you confess this with your heart, you become Muslim.

The second is prayer. You must pray 5 times a day – by kneeling down and facing Mecca – You must bow your head all the way to touch the ground.

The third is fasting. Once a year during Ramadan, Muslims will fast for an entire month – from dawn to dusk, and at night you can stop fasting. This period is in honor of the first vision Mohammad received.

The fourth is charity. Muslims must pay a small of their income, about 2.5%, to the poor and needy. This is above and beyond any other giving.

The final obligation of a Muslim is to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their life in remembrance of Abraham, Ishmael and Hagar.

Again, these are only the very basics of their beliefs. I wanted to give you a basic understanding of what our Muslim friends believe.

Before I start speaking to the differences between our religions – I wanted to share the fact that their faith can be an inspiration to us.

The very name Islam means submission to God – which is something that we all should strive for – let God lead our lives – give our worries over to him, trust in him.

No matter what a Muslim is doing during the day, they will stop five times and bow down and pray to God. I know for many Christians, once a day might be pushing it.

Having said this, we still have to look at some of the differences. There are some critical distinct beliefs.

The first is the Quran. While it does have some wonderful writings and sayings, as a Christian, we look at some of the stories we thought we are familiar with and have to wonder what happened to them.

Looking at the life of Jesus for example. His birth, events in his life, his teachings and even his death are different from what we read in our Gospels. The Quran teaches that Jesus was a great man – a great prophet – second only to Mohammad.

But it says that Jesus never died on the cross, but that he was taken into heaven while he was still living and that another man was crucified in his place.

We step back and say, "Wait a minute - that's not how the story took place. It's not how the eyewitnesses described it." As Christians, we remember that our Gospels have first- and second-hand accounts while the visions of Mohammed came hundreds of years after Jesus.

Many TV Evangelists or other Christians can be heard saying that Mohammad was crazy, he was a lunatic or he was just trying to be all powerful – almost like a God himself. Whether any of that is true or not, we shouldn't speak that way. We need to show how the love of Christ is above that. I believe that Mohammed was earnestly seeking God and looking to have God in his own life.

Something else about the Quran. In a lot of ways it is a step back from the New Testament. Yes it does talk about love and peace, but it also speaks about not sparing the sword when enemies attack you and killing them all if necessary. Which we have to remember, Mohammad was a warrior. So many of the things he said had a war type slant to them.

This is just opposite of the teachings of Jesus where he said that if someone slaps you on the cheek, turn the other cheek to them.

As I said before, in the Quran, we get a different view of Jesus. While Mohammed believed in the virgin birth of Jesus, he didn't believe in the reason for it. Mohammed didn't accept that Jesus came to die for the sins of the world.

Some Christian scholars believe that Mohammed did not completely understand the basics of the Christian faith. At one point in the Quran it seems that he thought Christians worship three gods: Allah, Mary and Jesus.

In some ways it seems that Mohammed was simply seeking out to make the gospel easier for non-Christians to believe but in the process he eliminated the central focus of the gospel.

Just like Muslims believe that the Jews and Christians corrupted the words of Moses and Jesus, we believe that Mohammad corrupted the words of the Old and New Testaments. Many feel the same is true about Joseph Smith and the Mormons.

But when we think of Muslims today, we unfortunately think about the extremists. We think of the terrorist. We see on the news our flag being burnt. Just Friday I saw a news brief of a bunch of Muslim extremists holding up signs that read, "Jesus love only the Muslims."

When we see these on the news, or we read about these activities in the newspaper – it makes us scared of Muslims.

After 9/11 – people were scared to get on an airplane – especially if there was a Muslim on board.

But we have our own extremists as well, don't we?

What about the White Supremacy movements? The Skin-Heads? The Neo-Nazi Christian groups?

What about the abortion protestors saying that murder is a sin – and then they blow up the clinic or shoot the doctor.

What I am trying to say is that we have our extremists as well.

Most of the Muslims we will find are loving and welcoming. They shake their head whenever one of their extremist Muslims gets on TV saying stupid things – much like we shake our heads when one of our fundamental Christian TV Evangelist says something stupid about another religion.

The best bet is communication. There is a lot of friction today between Christians, Muslims and Jews.

As a Christian, I cannot accept the Quran. I see the Muslims as cousins in that they do try to worship the same God. I believe that the way they surrender themselves to God is something we should strive to do in our own lives.

As Christians we also have a lot to share with our Muslim cousins about Jesus Christ and what he can do in our lives. But how do we do this? Not by arguing, Not by reacting in fear, Not by judging individuals without even knowing them, and Not by avoiding them because they are different.

I think the best way for us to share the gospel with them is by reaching out to them. They are just as frightened as we are. Because of everything happening in this world today, they might not be sure if they can trust you. How many Muslims were killed or beat up just walking down the street after 9/11?

Yes, we have critical differences between our two religions, but we have so much in common. Theological debates aren't the answer – but showing them the true love of Jesus Christ is the answer.

We can't be afraid to say hi, or shake their hand or get into a conversation with them. In 2 Corinthians Paul says, "We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us." So ask yourself, if you are an ambassador, what kind of ambassador for Christ will you be?