

About 1.5 billion people today profess submission to the will of Allah. That number represents almost a quarter of the world's population in adherence to Islam, a word (like the word Muslim) formed from the Arabic root *slm* meaning: submission, acceptance or surrender.

Muslims are not the enemies of Christians. Even if they were, our duty would be clear: love, prayer and compassion (Matthew 5:43-48). No, our enemies are spiritual in nature. Our enemies are the fleshly and demonic powers of this present age (Ephesians 6:12) who seek to devour and deceive those who are enslaved to any religion, whether atheistic, monotheistic, polytheistic or pantheistic. Our obligation toward Muslims is clear: we are to make disciples of them (Matthew 28:18-20) as we are all tribes, tongues, cultures, races and religions. We do not carry out this commission through the sword of jihad but through the Word of Jesus. We are to speak the truth of the gospel in love hoping that God may save.

The greatest need in evangelizing to Muslims is not a detailed understanding of Islam but rather a deep knowledge of and passion for the gospel. This holds true for any major religion. We don't need to be experts in particular world religions and cults to engage their adherents. We need to know and believe the gospel in all its glory and fullness. We need to know and love the triune God as He has revealed Himself in the Bible. If you want to engage your Muslim neighbor, learn the gospel and immerse yourself in the biblical revelation of God's work to accomplish redemption and reconciliation through the life, death, resurrection and future return of Jesus Christ. It is the gospel which is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." In it we exult, and with it we engage.

The primacy of the gospel does not imply that we should aim for ignorance of other religions; there is obvious good in studying other faiths in order to better evangelize to those who hold such beliefs. Numerous misunderstandings can be initially clarified if we know the context of another's worldview. Still, we are not ultimately dependent on an analysis of Islam but instead the anointing of the Spirit. Hopefully this article will give some initial clarity on Islam and prompt a greater passion to be faithful to God's command to engage our Muslim neighbors with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

History of Islam

In order to understand Islam, it is helpful to appreciate the environment where it was birthed. Pre-Islamic Arabia was centered between two once-great empires in decline (Byzantine and Persian). It was "a land of traders and raiders" with no united religion. Various tribes worshiped various gods, influenced to some degree by the Semitic, Babylonian, Greek and even Christian beliefs introduced along the numerous trade routes which traversed the Arabian Peninsula.

Muhammad was born into this religiously diverse environment in 570 A.D. Not much is known of the prophet's early life, but it is generally acknowledged that he lived a somewhat impoverished early life. His contact with Judaism and Christianity in particular give context for a growing concern of the young man with concepts of divine judgment and punishment.

When 40 years old, Mohammad experienced what Islamic tradition calls "The Night of Power and Excellence." While in a cave near Mecca, an angel appeared to him and commanded him to "recite," but he was unsure what to recite. Following was the first of many revelations that would continue until his death two decades later. These recitations were eventually compiled in the Qur'an (or Koran), a word which means "recite." The revelation of the Qur'an marks the one miracle of Muhammad's ministry according to Islam.

Muhammad was so troubled by the vision that he rushed home thinking he was insane or that he had been visited by a *jinn* (a spirit in Arabic tradition from which we get the word *genie*). Comforted and assured by the counsel of his wife, Muhammad eventually became convinced that the revelation was divine. Islam had been born, and Muhammad had become its true and ultimate prophet and messenger.

Once Muhammad was assured of the authenticity and authority of his revelation, he began to proclaim publicly in the streets of Mecca. For a decade he preached with relatively few converts. Instead, the common response of the citizens was skepticism. While residents were not concerned with the vast majority of his revelations, his claim to the prophetic voice undermined Meccan tribal authority and was thus met with increasing persecution. The inhabitants of Mecca were not yet ready to recognize Muhammad's authority. Meccan resistance eventually forced the prophet to flee.

In 622 A.D. Muhammad migrated to Yathrid (later renamed Medina – “the city of the prophet”). This event, Muhammad’s *hijra* (migration), marks year one of the Islamic calendar and the creation of the *umma* (the Islamic community).

In Medina, a theocracy was established with Muhammad as chief arbitrator. Islam began to form and flourish as various cultic practices were established including: weekly services on Friday, prostration during prayer, calls to prayer from the roof of the mosque, and the regular collecting of alms. *Sharia*, the way of life, began to emerge, and Islam transitioned from a religion with social and political implications to a true state religion.

Following this period of development was a time of contest as Mecca and Medina became engaged in a series of battles and raids. The struggle culminated with Muhammad marching on Mecca in 630, severing its trade lines. With Mecca under his rule, he quickly began a campaign to unify adjacent tribes under his leadership. Opponents had three options: convert to Islam, submit to Islamic authority and pay tribute, or die by the sword.

Just two years after taking Mecca, Muhammad developed a fever. His subsequent death was unexpected, and the *umma* was shaken. The loss of the messenger signaled the beginning of division in Islam regarding the succession of leadership (*caliphate* or *imamate*) – a schism eventually resulting in the modern distinction between Sunnis and Shi’ites. In spite of the division, Muhammad’s death also marked a period of rapid Islamic expansion as the somewhat consolidated tribes leveraged the weaknesses of the declining Byzantine and Persian empires. Within a century of the prophet’s death, Islam had evolved into an empire.

Major Tenets of Islam

Islam emphasizes deeds over doctrine. What a person does (*din*) is more important than what he or she believes (*iman*).

For the Muslim, all activities fall into one of five categories: obligatory, recommended, permissible, reprehensible or forbidden. However, there is no universal consensus on a great number of behaviors given variations among diverse forms of the religion.¹ As with most religions, there are disagreements among adherents on how to interpret the different religious literatures and traditions. In Islam, the dispute revolves around the interpretation and application of the Qur’an, Hadith and Sunnah (the latter two refer to traditional beliefs regarding the words, actions and approvals of Muhammad).

Despite diversity within Islam, all forms tend to center around “the five pillars.” These acts constitute the foundational works of a Muslim. To be a Muslim is to perform these particular deeds.

The Five Pillars of Islam

1. *Shahadah*: The Confession

“There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger.” With a single recitation of this simple profession of the Islamic creed, a person can convert to Islam. It contains the two foundational beliefs of the Muslim: the unity of Allah and the authority of Muhammad as his messenger.

The unity of Allah is foundational to Islamic faith. The Christian understanding of the tri-unity of God is considered *shirk*, an unforgivable sin. Formed from a root meaning “share,” *shirk* is used broadly to represent any form of blasphemy from idolatry to polytheism. To equate any person or thing with the singular Allah (as Christians do in confessing the deity of the Son and Spirit) denies the Islamic understanding of monotheism (*tawhid*).

2. *Salat*: Ritual Prayer

Five times a day Muslims face Mecca in prayer. The prayer typically consists of a profession of the words *Allahu Akbar* (“Allah is most great”) followed by bows, prostrations and recitations of the Qur’an. This form is then followed by the *shahadah* and a greeting of peace repeated twice.

3. *Sawm*: Fasting

Each Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, all Muslim adults are expected to abstain from food, drink and sexual activity from dawn to sunset. This is a time for reflection and discipline ended by a three-day “Feast of the Breaking of the Fast” (Id al-Fitr), a holiday in many countries in which gifts are exchanged.

4. *Zakat*: The Giving of Alms

Originally attempting to address economic inequalities, a tithe of accumulated wealth and assets (not merely income) is expected. The practice of *zakat* differs greatly in various contexts. In some countries it is governmentally imposed, while in other areas it is more voluntary in nature. In addition, the distribution of alms is diverse: ranging from providing for the needs of the poor, to *zakat* collectors themselves and to those fighting for a religious cause.

¹ For more information on the varying beliefs in Islam, consider *The Unseen Face of Islam* by Bill Musk.

5. *Hajj*: The Pilgrimage to Mecca

Each year millions of Muslims undertake the journey to Mecca. All devout Muslims are expected to make the pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime. It is an event filled with various ceremonial activities beginning with a visit to the *kaaba* (a large cube-shaped monument which is the holiest site in Islam). The *hajj* is officially ended by a three-day "Feast of Sacrifice," though many pilgrims then continue on to Medina to visit the mosque and tomb of Muhammad.

Jihad

Many maintain that the Islamic duty of *jihad* is a sixth pillar of the religion. For the Western mind, the word typically conjures up only the meaning of holy war, but this is merely one of three uses of the term, which essentially means "struggle." In addition to the militant use of the term, *jihad* is also used to refer to the inner struggle of the individual Muslim to submit to Allah's will and the communal struggle to improve the *umma* or Islamic society.

Biblical Assessment of Islam

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

Galatians 1:8-9

There is no doctrine of original, Adamic or inherited sin in Islam. Without this biblical hamartiology (doctrine of sin), there is no biblical soteriology (doctrine of salvation), Christology or theology proper. A deficient doctrine of sin always results in a deformed doctrine of salvation. Without an actual Fall, salvation is reformulated as mere moral effort and a substitutionary Savior is seen as superfluous.

Galatians is an excellent place to start in analyzing the claims of Islam. Not only does it open with an important evaluation of angelic visions such as Muhammad received (Galatians 1:8-9), but it goes on to explicitly reject the Islamic exaltation of Ishmael over Isaac as the promised son (Galatians 4:21-31). Additionally, it gives explicit testimony to the Fatherhood of God (Galatians 1:1, 16; 4:6), the death and resurrection of Jesus

Christ (Galatians 1:1, 4; 3:1), the covenant keeping nature of God (Galatians 3:15-29), and an enslaved flesh in fundamental rebellion against God (Galatians 5:16-24) – all of which are clearly rejected in Islam.² Even more helpful is the epistle's emphasis on justification by faith apart from works.

The same book, which opens with a curse upon any who preach a false gospel, vividly describes the essence of all false gospels. The bulk of the epistle deals with the rejection of the gospel of grace and its relationship to faith. Paul relates a rejection of justification by faith to an anti-gospel. Where salvation by grace through faith in the person and work of Christ is opposed, works-based righteousness always springs forth. In effect, all other religions reveal this same tendency. Whether the disciplined life of a Buddhist, the baptism and good works of a Mormon, or the prayers, professions and pilgrimages of a Muslim, all non-gospel religions are founded upon man's attempt to appease God through works. Islam, by its foundational rejection of salvation by grace alone through faith alone, reveals itself as a type of anti-gospel.

Because man is inherently unable to perform all the law requires (through original sin), he abides under a curse. Only a gospel which exalts one who is cursed in our place can save us from this curse (Galatians 1:10-14). All who teach a gospel contrary to the life, death, resurrection and future return of Jesus Christ are accursed because only in Him are we redeemed, reconciled and released from the curse. Christ either bears the curse for you, or you abide under the curse yourself. There is no other option.

Justification by faith is essential to the gospel of Jesus Christ.³ "If justification were through the law, Christ died for no purpose" (Galatians 2:21). "You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law" (Galatians 5:4). Islamic theology holds no place for the biblical gospel of salvation by grace through faith. Islamic justification is simply an arbitrary work of a capricious God taking into account a person's meritorious discipline and duty. This is not the gospel of the Bible. This is not the true gospel.

Muhammad received an angelic vision in a cave in Mecca, but angelic visions are not inherently authoritative for "even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). All visions, prophecies and revelations must be assessed by the canon of Scripture, for all which oppose the biblical gospel are false and accursed (Galatians 1:8-9). In light of this standard, Islam is weighed and found wanting.

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² For a reading of the Qur'an arranged topically, consider *The Word of Islam* edited by John Alden Williams.

³ For the essential importance of justification by faith, consider *No Other Gospel* by Josh Moody, which is subtitled *31 Reasons From Galatians Why Justification by Faith Alone is the Only Gospel*.

Recommended Resources

In recommending resources on Islam, it is important to bear in mind how we began. Your greatest need in evangelism is the evangel, the gospel of Jesus Christ. Ponder Christ. Pray for the power of the Spirit. Preach the truth in love.

Beyond that, here are a few resources that might be helpful in getting to know the beliefs and behaviors of your Muslim neighbor.

Free Online Course

→ [**An Introduction to Islam**](#) by Timothy Tennent

Works on Islam in Particular

→ [**The Gospel for Muslims**](#) by Thabiti Anyabwile

→ [**Breaking the Islam Code**](#) by J.D. Greear

→ [**The Dark Side of Islam**](#) by R.C. Sproul

Works on World Religions in General

→ [**Neighboring Faiths**](#) by Winfriend Corduan

→ [**A History of the World's Religions**](#) by David Noss