



KNOWING & DOING

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A Thumbnail Sketch of Islam for Christians

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Islam is the second biggest religion in the world. In 2014 there are 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide. Most do not live in the Middle East. There are more than 210 million people in Indonesia who say Allah is God and Muhammad the chief and seal (last) of the prophets; 150 million in India, 170 million in Pakistan. As you can see, far more Muslims live in south- and southeast Asia than in the Middle East. Sub-Saharan Africa contains more than 130 million, with 75 million in Nigeria alone.

How many Muslims live in the United States? It depends on who answers the question. Scholars at City College of New York say 1.1 million, while the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), a Muslim organization, claims 6 to 7 million. The best estimate is probably between 1 and 2 million.

The 2007 Pew survey of Muslim Americans found that two-thirds are foreign-born. Among the foreign-born, most had immigrated since 1990. Of the roughly one-third of Muslim Americans who are native-born, the majority were converts and African American.

There are about 1,200 mosques in the United States, which provides further evidence that the numbers are considerably less than reported by CAIR. If there were actually 5 million Muslims in the United States (and CAIR claims more), each mosque would serve nearly 4,200 Muslims. Yet many mosques are storefronts, and the nation's largest mosque, Dar al-Hijrah near Washington, D.C., has only about 3,000 weekly attendees.

Rapid Growth

Islam is one of the world's fastest-growing world religions. (Christianity is growing almost as quickly.) Several factors account for this: Muslims are aggressive in their evangelism (especially in Africa), their message is easily understood (Muslims say Christian theology is complicated and hard to believe), and they offer the politically alienated the prospect of national transformation. But until recently the most significant factor in Islam's rapid growth rate has been birthrate. In 1997 the United Nations estimated that the average woman in developed countries typically bore 1.6 children during her lifetime, while the average woman in the largest Muslim countries gave birth to 5.0. But according to demographer Nicholas Eberstadt, Muslim birthrates have fallen dramatically in recent years to around replacement rate or just above in many Muslim countries.

Central Theme

The Arabic word *Islam* (lit., "submission") points to the central idea of the religion--submission to the total will of Allah. The word *Allah* is Arabic for "the god." Muslims proclaim to the world that God alone is great and rules with absolute control over every atom of the universe. Therefore it only makes sense for each of us to submit every detail of life to God's will as it has been revealed to his final prophet, Muhammad.

Muhammad (570–632 AD)

The founder of Islam endured a troubled childhood. He lost his father before he was born, and his mother died when he was six. Then he lived with his grandfather, who perished two years later. The orphan then lived out the rest of his childhood with his uncle. Perhaps because of his own heartbreaks, Muhammad became a religious seeker, often retreating to mountain caves above Mecca for meditation. When he was forty, Muhammad said, the angel Gabriel began delivering to him messages from Allah. These first messages terrified Muhammad. But he received reassurance from his wife Khadijah and her Christian cousin, who assured Muhammad that he had been visited by the same being who had visited Moses, that God was calling him to be a prophet to his people. The earliest messages emphasized that there is only one God (before Muhammad, the Arab tribes had worshiped 360 different gods, the chief of whom had been called Allah) and that every human being would face the judgment of this God. These messages and later revelations, all of which the illiterate Muhammad dictated to his disciples, make up the Qur'an.

The Qur'an

The Qur'an is about the same length as the New Testament, but the similarities end there. It was dictated by only one man (the New Testament was composed by many writers) and is neither a book of history (as the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles purport to be) nor a life of Muhammad (in contrast, the Christian gospels aim to provide the theologically significant events of Jesus' life) nor theological treatise (as Paul's Letter to the Romans could be considered). Instead, it is a book of proclamation—that God is one and sovereign, judgment is coming, and we need to submit to Allah.

Inspiration

You can also find these themes in the Bible, but Muslims and Christians have very different conceptions of the nature of scriptural inspiration. While Christians believe the Bible is a joint product of both human and divine agency, Muslims believe their holy book contains not a shred of human influence. Christians usually want to distinguish Paul's personal writing style or cultural influences from the divine Word, for example, but Muslims deny that Muhammad's personality or cultural affinities had anything to do with the words of the Qur'an. Muslims, then, accept a dictation theory of inspiration that nearly all Christians reject for their Bible. This is one reason why the Muslim community was so outraged by Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. The novel insinuates that the Qur'an is not the Word of Allah, but has been altered by either the angel Gabriel or Muhammad's followers who first recorded the revelations entrusted to the Prophet. Rushdie's title is even more sinister; according to Islamic tradition, very early versions of the Qur'an contained verses that suggested the worship of three goddesses alongside Allah. Muhammad soon had them removed, explaining that the devil had given him disinformation. They have been known ever since in Islamic lore as the "satanic verses." So the implication of Rushdie's title is that the entire Qur'an, which for Muslims is as sacred as the person of Jesus is to Christians, has been corrupted.



The Message of the Qur'an

The Qur'an tells its readers and listeners (it was meant to be recited out loud) that human beings are created by God to serve God and avoid idolatry, which involves giving first allegiance to anything other than God—money, family, race, success, or earthly life itself. There are two final destinations—hell (which punishes with boiling water, pus, chains, searing wind, and food that chokes), for those who reject the message of the Prophet, and Paradise, which offers wide-eyed damsels, wine, and luscious fruits to those who prove to be faithful Muslims. Modernist Muslims say the same thing about these passages that many Christians say about biblical descriptions of heaven and hell—that they are simply metaphorical ways of saying that the presence of God is delightful and absence from God will be horrible.

The Qur'an teaches that Islam is the simplest and clearest of religions and stands as the essential core of every other religion; it is the revelation that was given originally to Abraham but was later distorted by the Jewish and Christian traditions. This is why God needed to give it once more to Muhammad.

Jesus in Islam

American Christians are generally surprised when they learn of the extraordinary respect that Muslims hold for Jesus. He was the greatest of all the prophets, they say, until Muhammad. The Qur'an even recognizes Jesus as "Messiah," "word from God," "a Spirit from God," and the son of Mary who was "strengthened with the Holy Spirit." It teaches the Virgin Birth (Mary is said by Muslims to have been the purest woman in all creation) and accepts the historicity of all the gospel miracles but one—Jesus' resurrection.

How Jews and Christians Went Wrong (according to Muslims)

Muslims regard the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God, but they quickly add that Jews and Christians have corrupted the texts at critical points. Jews perverted the original revelation, Muslims claim, by an act of communal narcissism. They took a message intended for every nation and turned it into an exclusive proclamation of salvation for themselves alone—that they alone are the Chosen People. Although the Qur'an is silent on the issue, some Muslims believe that Jews substituted Isaac's name for Ishmael's in the book of Genesis and thus concealed for centuries the Arabian connection in the history of salvation.

Christians, Muslims believe, made the mistake of turning Jesus into a god and therefore reverting to the polytheism that Allah forbids. Most Muslims deny that Jesus was crucified, because the Qur'an states that the Jews did not kill Jesus and that God "raised [Jesus] to himself" in a manner reminiscent of Elijah. More important, Muslims deny that Jesus was the Son of God, imagining that that would mean that God had engaged in sex, which is unimaginable. Islam also denies that Jesus was a savior because of its conviction that each of us must be responsible for our own sins. To imagine that someone else can save us from our sins seems to Muslims to be spiritually irresponsible. Most of them are convinced that no one can receive such spiritual benefits from another. I say "most," because many mystical Muslims (Sufis) believe they need the help of the Prophet and his family for salvation.

Muslim tradition teaches that eventually both Judaism and Christianity will wither away, as most of the world accepts Islam's version of monotheism. Almost all Muslims believe that Jesus will indeed return, as Christians believe, but when Jesus comes Jesus will turn the world back to the original teaching of Abraham—Islam.

The Five Pillars

These are the five practices that every faithful Muslim wants to observe.

1. Profession of faith: "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God." Simply reciting this in public makes one a Muslim. Notice how important Muhammad is. Many Muslims believe he never sinned and performed many miracles, though there is no record of these in the Qur'an. His sayings and deeds, recorded with varying degrees of authenticity in the *Hadith* (many volumes), contain miracle stories. These sayings and deeds,

after being weighed for their relative authenticity, serve as precedents for Islamic law (*shari'ah*). At the same time, it is insisted upon that he was only a man.

2. Prayer five times daily. Believers are to face Mecca and pray in the early morning, at noon, midafternoon, sunset, and in the evening. But before prayer at each of these times, there is to be washing of the arms, feet, mouth, and nostrils—and three times for each of these body parts. The prayers are generally set prayers of praise and adoration. There is a prayer service every Friday (which is not a holy day as Sunday is for Christians and Saturday for Jews), with two sermons by trained laymen. Women sit separately from the men, but most women do not attend.

3. Almsgiving. Sunnis give 2.5 percent of their income to support Muslim needy, but Shi'ites are told to contribute 20 percent.

4. Fasting during Ramadan. Ramadan is a month in the Islamic calendar, which is based on the moon, and so the month is at a different time from year to year. It marks the time when the Qur'an was first revealed to Muhammad. During this month Muslims are to abstain from all liquids, food, tobacco, and sex between first light in the morning and full darkness at night. They say the purpose of this fasting is to practice self-restraint.

5. Pilgrimage to Mecca. Muslims believe Mecca (in today's Saudi Arabia) is the navel of the world, the location of Eden, and the one point on planet Earth closest to Paradise. Here they say Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael built a house of worship, which still exists as a giant stone cube, draped in black. It was also from here that Muhammad is said to have taken his "night journey" to Jerusalem and then Paradise and back—all in one night. Some Muslims say this was allegorical not literal. Few Muslims actually make the pilgrimage to Mecca; those who do not are blameworthy only if they can afford it and are healthy enough but neglect to do so.



Sunnis and Shi'ites

Since September 11, 2001, most Americans have heard of Sunnis and Shi'ites but have little idea of what makes them different. Here are the essentials.

Sunnis are far and away the most numerous, representing about 85 percent of all Muslims in the world. Their interpretation of the faith is based on what the *ulama* have said. These are the Islamic scholars who have reached consensus on what is true and right, based on their understanding of the Qur'an and *Hadith*—the collected record of what the Prophet said and did. Sunnis think revelation stopped with the decisions of the early *ulama* centuries ago. Their consensus judgments were infallible. Some modernist Muslims blame Islamic radicalism on this belief in infallibility. They say the *ulama* should never have taken away Muslims' right to think independently (*ijtihad*) based on the Qur'an and Islamic law.

Sunnis also believe Muhammad did not designate a successor, and so the first leaders after the Prophets (*caliphs*) were legitimately chosen by the early Islamic community. Shi'ites disagree with this, as you will see.

Sunnis have generally had the upper hand in Islamic history, so they have an optimistic view of history. They believe Islam is steadily growing and

winning ascendancy in the world. The last fifty years, in which Muslim nations have found great oil wealth under their sands, seems to have confirmed this view for many.

Shi'ites, on the other hand, are only 15 percent of the world's Muslims and live mostly in Iran and southern Iraq. They get their name from the battles over Muhammad's successor, after which they split from the majority to form their own distinct party (*shia*). Shi'ites believe Muhammad's successor should have come from his family, and that the Prophet had chosen Ali, his cousin and son-in-law to succeed him. But since the Muslim community chose Abu Bakr and several other *caliphs* from outside the family, Shi'ites consider three of the first four *caliphs* (one was Ali) to have been illegitimate.

The most important event in Shia history was the martyrdom in AD 680 of Ali's son Hussein, who led an uprising against one of the "illegitimate" caliphs. Hussein has become the Shi'ite symbol of resistance to tyranny, and to this day participation in the annual re-enactment of his martyrdom is the central act of Shi'ite piety.

The largest group within the Shi'ite faith is known as the "Twelvers." They believe the leader who stood at the end of Muhammad's line, the Twelfth Imam (prayer leader), is still alive invisibly and is going to return visibly at the end of history to rid the world of evil. The recent president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has said publicly that the purpose of the Iranian revolution (started in 1979 by the Ayatollah Khomeini) is to pave the way for the Mahdi's return.

Other prominent Shi'ite leaders, however, disagree. Iraq's Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani teaches that the Mahdi's coming cannot be hastened by human activity.

For most of their history, Shi'ites have been powerless, marginalized, and oppressed—often by Sunnis. They have not held much hope for the success of their movement in this world. Therefore their recent success in Iran and now Iraq, and the hope of some for the early return of the Mahdi, is fairly new.

Islam and Violence

Some have attributed the horror of September 11 to Islamic *jihad*, which is usually translated as "holy war." But this is misleading. Jihad is divided by Muslims into two categories: the greater and the lesser. The greater *jihad* is the war within oneself against one's own evil. The lesser *jihad* is defense against aggressive attacks on Islam. These actions do not necessarily involve armed conflict but may simply be expressions of the pen or tongue. While radical Islam today thinks *jihad* should be carried to all the world, mainstream Islam through most of its history has said that armed conflict is to be primarily defensive and strictly regulated.

Muhammad wrote, "In avenging injuries inflicted on us, do not harm non-belligerents in their homes; spare the weakness of women; do not injure infants at the breast, or those who are sick. Do not destroy the houses of those who offer no resistance, and do not destroy their means of subsistence, neither their fruit trees, nor their palms." The Qur'an says that if you kill one person without reason it is as if you slew all of humanity (5:32).

At the same time, the Qur'an commands its readers to "slay the idolaters wheresoever you find them" (9:5). Some Muslim scholars say this was a command given in the heat of the first community's struggle for survival. They point to passages in the Qur'an such as the famous one condemning religious coercion in 2:256: "There is [should be] no compulsion in religion." They also say the Qur'an promotes religious diversity, such as 5:48: "To each of you [peoples] We [God] have given a law and a way and a pattern of life. If God had pleased He could surely have made you one people (professing one faith). But He wished to try and test you by that which He gave you." This is the translation in the Princeton University Press edition of the Qur'an, and the phrase "professing one faith" is not in the Arabic. This edition's translator thinks it is implied, and that is the interpretation which El Fadl (see the box) and other Muslim "liberals" see in this and similar passages (11:118–19, 49:13).

But while many Muslims condemn the terrorism used by their militant co-religionists, there is a historical link between Islam and aggressive military and political action. Muhammad was a military and political—as well as religious—leader. He served as both prophet and commander, preacher and soldier, imam and magistrate. The first community of Muslims was a socio-politico-religious amalgamation, and traditional Islam has taught that government should enforce Islamic law (*shari'ah*), which is why Islam has usually shown greater organic unity between this- and other-worldly concerns than in Christianity. Muslim leaders have sometimes exploited passages such as the "slay the idolaters" verse (as well as the Islamic teaching that warriors who die in a holy war will go

straight to Paradise and skip over years of suffering in a purgatory-like existence) when they have tried to muster a people for war.

Islam and the West

While some of the strongest expressions of disdain (“America is the Great Satan,” for example) speak for only a minority of Muslims, many Muslims nevertheless regard the West with ambivalence. They appreciate and use its technology but consider Western culture as a threat to their own because it represents modernization without moral control. Muslims place great emphasis on the integrity of the nuclear family and pride themselves on the stability of their families. They see our Western values of atomistic individualism and sexual permissiveness as destructive of family life. They are fully aware of America’s soaring rates of divorce, abortion, pornography, crime, and chemical addiction (much of which is broadcast to their countries through movies, TV, and the Internet) and wonder why Americans regard Muslim culture with self-righteous disdain.

Muslims also tend to view the West, particularly the United States, as irreligious and godless because of our separation of church and state. If God is sovereign over the cosmos, Muslims argue, then every aspect of life—including the state—ought to come under the rule of his laws. Islamic law (*shari’ah*) should therefore serve as a set of fundamental principles informing the laws of every nation on the earth.

More militant Muslims feel the West is out to destroy Islam (despite the fact that the past few major American interventions abroad, in Kuwait, Somalia, the Balkans, Afghanistan, and even Iraq were conducted in defense of Muslims). As a Western-educated Muslim engineer once asked me (before Pakistan’s acquisition of nuclear weapons), “Why does the United States permit India, Israel, and South Africa to have nuclear weapons, but not Iraq or Pakistan?” Many Muslims believe there is a Zionist-American conspiracy to reduce the Muslim nations to their former colonial status under Western control. They see Israel as America’s client state and believe that the American government is controlled by Jewish lobbies. As the war in Iraq progressed, more and more Muslims concluded the United States was out to control oil and the Middle East.

Yet even these suspicions fall far short of the venomous hatred required to teach young men to fly jetliners as missiles into skyscrapers in order to purposely destroy thousands of innocent people. The genesis of this barbarity lies not with Islam but *Islamism*, the term some scholars use to distinguish mainstream Islam from the twentieth-century terroristic ideology first seen in the Ayatollah Khomeini. Islamism is preferable to the popular term *Islamic fundamentalism*, which was coined by the Western media to denigrate conservative Christians in the West by associating them with Islamic violence. Jeffrey Goldberg described in the *New York Times Magazine* the way that Islamism takes boys as young as eight years old out of dire poverty and puts them in special schools, isolated from all secular learning, art, music, women, and mainstream Islam. There they are indoctrinated, day in and day out in the theology, ethics, and worldview of violent Islamism. There is no consideration of different views of the Qur’an, only simple rote learning of prescribed views, and liberal doses of venomous anti-Semitism. A worldwide terroristic network gives these boys an education at no cost to them—paying for their room and board and clothing, and their teachers and buildings, and then giving them jobs in organizations like the Taliban.



Your Muslim Neighbor

Perhaps you have a Muslim neighbor or coworker. How do you share the love of Christ with him or her? Here are a few ideas.

1. **Show real interest in their faith.** Study it. This article is a good start.
2. **Be slow to criticize.** A recent Muslim convert to Christian faith in India said, “Don’t discuss any of the faults or weaknesses of Islam or speak ill of Muhammad or the Qur’an. Speak to the Muslim of Jesus and his stories and miracles.” You may be surprised to learn that Jesus is the most developed character in the Qur’an. As we saw earlier, Muslims typically have huge respect for Jesus. Build upon this respect, and ask your friend if she’d like to read the *injl* (gospel) that tells more about Jesus.
3. **Muslims have a very difficult time understanding how Jesus could be God.** It seems polytheistic, or even blasphemous to say God has a Son. As I have suggested, most Muslims think this would require God to have engaged in sex, which is unthinkable. But you can explain that Christians agree that God did not engage in sex, that even the Qur’an calls Jesus the Messiah (Qur’an 3:45), and the Gospels say Jesus is Lord and claimed the authority to forgive sins. Only God has that authority.
4. **The Incarnation is equally difficult for Muslims.** Charles White, a missionary to Muslim parts of Africa, used to tell his students about the man who became an ant. He saw ants going into a house where they would be poisoned. He told them over and over not to enter, but they didn’t listen. Finally, the man became an ant, and now they could hear and understand. By becoming one of them, this man was able to save ants from destruction.
5. **The Incarnation might be a bit easier for Shi’ites to understand, because they believe a divine substance from Muhammad passes from *imam* to *imam*.** They can be told that in a similar way the divine substance passed—as it were—from the Father to the Son.
6. **White also told his Muslim students of two kinds of greatness.** One is of the king who sits on a high throne and has scores of servants scurrying around to do his bidding. The other kind of greatness is of a brilliant student who works hard in medical school and graduates with the ability to go anywhere he wants. But rather than following other top graduates to lucrative practices in the suburbs, he goes to work among the poor in the inner city. That is what God did, in His power and greatness, when He came to live among sinful men.
7. **The message of forgiveness, and power from the Holy Spirit, can be appealing to a Muslim who feels crushed by the demands of the law.** He is told that he can never know for sure if he will reach Paradise, and because he knows the weakness of his heart, he is in despair. The gospel message that Christ came to save sinners not the righteous, and that He gives power to live a righteous life nonetheless, can be liberating for such a conscientious soul.
8. **Like all our neighbors, our Muslim neighbors and friends should be shown respect and love.** We should recognize the religious truth they already have and not assume they would need to throw out everything they’ve ever believed in order to come to Christ. If they sense this kind of respect in you for them, they may, like Cornelius who already feared God and prayed regularly to God before he heard about Jesus (Acts 10:2), “come to listen to all the Lord tells you to say” (Acts 10:33b).

For further reading:

Mateen Ellass, *Understanding the Koran: A Quick Christian Guide to the Muslim Holy Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).



Islam denies the Incarnation. It will not allow that God has descended into flesh or that Manhood has been exalted into Deity. . . . It stands for all religions that are afraid of matter and afraid of mystery. . . .

C.S. Lewis



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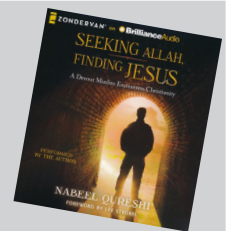
RECOMMENDED READING

Nabeel Qureshi, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity* (Zondervan, 2014)

In *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*, Nabeel Qureshi describes his dramatic journey from Islam to Christianity, complete with friendships, investigations, and supernatural dreams along the way.

Providing an intimate window into a loving Muslim home, Qureshi shares how he developed a passion for Islam before discovering, almost against his will, evidence that Jesus rose from the dead and claimed to be God. Unable to deny the arguments but not wanting to deny his family, Qureshi's inner turmoil will challenge Christians and Muslims alike.

Engaging and thought-provoking, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus* tells a powerful story of the clash between Islam and Christianity in one man's heart—and of the peace he eventually found in Jesus.



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