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Christianity & World Religions: Islam

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Genesis 21:9 – 20

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If the world were made up a “global village” of 100 people, there would be approximately:

- 33 Christians
- 21 Muslims
- 16 Non-religious folks, some of whom would believe there was a god.
- 14 Hindus
- 6 Buddhists
- 6 Primal-Animists
- 6 Chinese Traditionalists
- 0 Jews (1/5 of one person would be Jewish)

Genesis 21:9 “But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, 10 and she said to Abraham, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.” 11 The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son... 17 God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard Ishmael crying as he lies there. 18 Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.”... 20 God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer.”

Of all the religions we’re looking at, Islam may be the most important for Christians to learn about, next to our own faith. We seem to be on a collision course with the Islamic world in ways we simply don’t understand. Most Christians are clueless about Islam, and we’ve equated terrorism with Islam as a whole, when the truth is Muslims are scared by the terrorists too.

So let’s look: Islam is the youngest of the world’s 5 major religions. It began with one man: Mohammed. He lived 63 years, from 570AD to 632AD. Born in Mecca in what is now Saudi Arabia. Let’s look at his story.

Mohammed’s early life was marked by tragedy. His father died before he was born, his mother died when he was 6. His grandfather died right after that. So Mohammed was raised by his uncle. He never learned to read or write. He grew up in Mecca, a center for commerce and pagan worship of more than 360 gods. And like almost all primal religions, the worship involved pretty bizarre and sickening things. But in the middle of all this there were 2 smaller groups of people who did not worship that way, and Mohammed was drawn to them: the Jews and the Christians. For them, there was no other god, only the One God: in Arabic called Allah (Like Dios in Spanish).

Mohammed became a man of deep spirituality. He married, and had 6 children, and once more tragedy struck: his 2 boys died in infancy; which deepened Mohammed’s longing for spiritual truth. Mohammed came to believe there was only one true God. He became deeply troubled by the Mecca worship thing, and retreated to a cave on a mountainside to pray. Around age 40, he had a profound experience: while praying,

he had a dream. A spiritual being he came to understand as Gabriel the angel, spoke to him in visions. Mohammed would emerge from these dreams and speak to the people of Mecca. The majority of the people didn't listen, but about 40 followers did.

Then tragedy struck again: His wife died, and leaders in Mecca wanted to kill him. His teaching was a huge threat to the idol-worship establishment. At this time the city of Medina offered Mohammed the chance to come and rule them. That was in 622AD. They set up the first Islamic state there. Islamic law prevailed, with worship of Allah alone. Muslim calendars begin from the *hajjaree*, the day they established the rule of Allah in Medina.

From this time, Mohammed became a political ruler. He was a judge for the city, and he had a small army. He also had visions that were different from those on the mountainside above Mecca. Those early ones were theological, about God. These new visions from Gabriel were about how to order society. He also received instruction on how to lead an army and wage war. As he became a political ruler, Mohammed became a warrior. They fought against surrounding villages and tribes, and expanded their power. Thus the rule of Allah spread. They battled and won over Mecca. Mohammed was now the ruler of Mecca, and consequently, the Arabian Peninsula.

Three years later, in 632, he died. Following Mohammed's death, his followers collected all the sayings that had been written down from his prophetic visions. This is what we know as El Quran, the Koran. The Quran is basically a listing of Mohammed's visions, from the longest to the shortest. And from that time on, his follower took their faith throughout the world. It spread like wildfire across North Africa, the Middle East, and into southern Europe.

Basic beliefs: Islam and Muslim has as their root the world *slm*, like the Hebrew word *shalom*, or peace. *Slm* means peace, but more like submission or surrender. Islam is the religion of submission or surrender to Allah. A Mu"slim" is one who is submitted to Allah.

Submission to Allah is a profound idea. Obedient Muslims have submitted their entire lives and selves to God. Christians believe this as well—that we should be wholly and completely surrendered to God. But while Muslims consider themselves slaves, Jesus said in John 15:15 "*I no longer call you servants... Instead, I have called you friends.*"

Mohammed was looking at the God of Abraham, the same God Christians and Jews serve. All 3 religions *intend* to worship the same God, though that is difficult to accept because of the departure of the Quran from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

The Quran—contains literally the very words of God, spoken by Gabriel to Mohammed. Hear this: The Quran is to Islam what Jesus is to Christianity: the Word of God, definitive and final. It is 20% shorter than our New Testament, and its style and content are very different. Christians believe that human beings inspired by God composed the Bible. Our Scriptures are primarily words, narratives, poems, and letters about God and our response. Paul, not God, wrote Romans. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—not God, wrote the Gospels.

Because Muslims view this as the very words of God, the Quran is never translated. It is only legitimate if it is in Arabic, the *actual words* God used. You would recognize a lot in the Quran. Stories of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jonah, Mary, Jesus, and John the Baptist. But they don't match up to what we know. A Muslim would say that where they disagree, the Quran is correct. The Quran corrects the corruptions of Judaism and Christianity. So what do we learn in the Quran? First, the 5 pillars of Islam:

1. Belief. Confessing your faith. Islam focuses on one simple faith statement: "There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet." If you confess this and mean it, you have become a Muslim. Allah is in control. There is no doctrine of sin. Bad things happen because Allah wills it. Thus, a Muslim can be left very much with a sense of fatalism called *Kismet*.
2. Prayer. 5 times per day. Muslims kneel to face Mecca, bow their heads all the way to the floor before God. Their praying is spread throughout the day as a reminder to keep the path.

3. Fasting. Once a year, during Ramadan, from dawn till dusk. This commemorates the first vision that was given to Mohammed. It also marks the *Hijra*, the flight from Mecca to Medina.
4. Charity. their “purity of wealth”, usually about 2.5% that goes to the poor and needy, once per year.
5. Pilgrimage. Once in their lifetime, Muslims are to make the *Hajj*—the pilgrimage to Mecca, as remembrance of Abraham, Ishmael, and Hagar. It brings unity to the movement as a whole.

Before describing some differences, I want to highlight several ways in which we agree deeply. Often, Muslim lives and faith can inspire us. The whole name means *submission to God*. If that doesn't describe our goals in life, I'm not sure what does. And regardless of what they're doing, faithful Muslims stop 5 times throughout the day and *yield their lives to God*. Imagine how much turmoil we might avoid if we did the same. Giving to the poor is also important in both faiths.

How does God speak to people? Many people have claimed that God spoke directly to them and appointed them as messengers with new revelation that supercedes the Bible. In the US, Joseph Smith made similar claims in founding the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Smith maintained that God, through an angel, had given him new scriptures, which became known as the Book of Mormon. The fact is, we should measure *all* such messages against what we know of God through Jesus Christ and the witnesses who knew Christ firsthand.

As Christ-followers we believe God's Word didn't come just filtered through the mind and heart of a prophet, or the words of an angel. Instead, God became flesh and lived among us. Because the Word took human form, God could speak to us in our own language. That's why the Bible is translated in other languages, while the Quran is not. And because the Quran is held as the very words of God, it is part and parcel with the culture of 7th Century Arabia. Christianity does not have a culture of its own, but rather redeems customs and cultures into which it is introduced, first noted in the Book of Acts itself. Muslim countries act out culture that looks very similar to the way people lived in the 600s.

The Bible and the Quran diverge in some major ways. For example, Jesus' birth, teachings, and death are very different. The Quran teaches the virgin birth and that Jesus was NOT crucified. He was taken directly to heaven while another man was crucified in his place. This is very different from our eyewitness accounts that describe it. Mohammed rejected the idea that Jesus came to die for the sins of the world. He believed that God forgives us when we sin and counts good deeds in our favor.

Look how this plays out: Remember the **Mohammed cartoons**: Remember the outcry and violence of the Muslim world to the Danish cartoons of Mohammed? The outcry was because Mohammed's work is based on being honored, while Christ's work is based on being insulted. The Bible itself describes the mocking—first in prophecies from the Psalms and Isaiah, and then in the actual accounts: *“They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head....And kneeling before him, they mocked him saying “Hail, King of the Jews!” And they spit on him.” Matthew 27:28-29*. Jesus, and his followers, were and still are, willing to pay whatever price it took that we would not only hear the message, but that we would experience salvation. A religion with no insulted Savior will not endure insults to win people. Christianity initially spread through non-aggressive means, especially the blood of martyrs, while Islam initially spread at least in part through military conflict, with the blood of its opponents often flowing. Christianity held up those who died as heroes, while Islam honors its warlike victors.

We say God became flesh. God didn't commit it to another prophet. God acted directly by living among us. **Jesus, however, was willing to pay any price to prove to us the love of God**, even letting us kill him and shame him. Jesus commanded his followers to love their enemies, turn the other cheek, and take up their cross. The Quran speaks of not sparing the sword when enemies attack you and killing all if necessary. Those teachings were a reflection of the violent times in which Mohammed lived. Now, lest we get too self-righteous, our Bible in the Hebrew Scriptures tells of times when violence was called for. But in the New Testament we find a very different, what we would say fulfilled picture of God.

Why the rapid spread of Islam? As I reflected with friends who have lived and spent time in the Middle East, we looked at how appealing it is for men, as opposed to women, and the peace of mind that seems to

come from holding fast to external rules. It would be much easier for me as pastor to have 16 rules that we all lived by, so I could tell who was living the Christian life and not have to worry about them. But because Christianity is based on relationship, it doesn't work that way. But we men especially would like it to. For example, my wife Leigh finds it terribly frustrating that I have such difficulty in coming up with presents for her for Christmas or her birthday. Most men struggle with this. We have to write down secretly any time our wives mention something that they might like. Women, you DO understand you have to spell it out for us, don't you? But that's exactly what Leigh hates. Because after all these years of relationship, I should know what she would like! And when I can't come up with it, it calls the relationship itself into question. It's like the old "Honey, what's wrong?" "That's just it! If you don't know, I'm not going to tell you!" ☺ We men especially need it spelled out. But Christianity doesn't work that way, because it's based on relationship. Christianity is the world religion that is not all about what a person has to do, but all about what God does for us. It's not external rules, but from a changed heart that no longer wants to be entrapped in sin and that wants to love and serve others, no matter what faith they come from.

Some Christian people attack Mohammed as a lunatic. That is not the way to talk about someone else's prophet. And it sure doesn't help Muslims hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the love (rather than the anger) of God. He was earnestly seeking God that he was longing to experience in his life. And we have much to share with Muslims about Jesus Christ and what he can do in our lives. The question today is HOW will we share this? By arguing? By reacting fearfully? By judging them without getting to know them? By avoiding them? No. Remember, our theology has a lot to do with how we live. So, this week, remember that God became flesh—incarnate. Reach out in love to others, just like God did to us. We will never help Muslims understand the significance of Jesus Christ if we cannot first let them see His love through us. In 2 Corinthians 5:20, Paul says, "*We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making His appeal through us.*" What kind of an ambassador will you be?