

## Christianity and World Religions: Islam

On September 11, 2001, 19 militants associated with the Islamic extremist group al-Qaeda committed a series of airline hijackings and suicide attacks against targets in our country.

Many of us remember that day vividly. We remember watching the events unfolding in front of our eyes on tv. We remember the fear, the horror, the shock, and the pain. We remember the days and weeks and years that followed and how we were changed forever by what happened.

The attacks were the deadliest terrorist attacks on American soil in U.S. history. The attacks against [New York City](#) and [Washington, D.C.](#), caused extensive death and destruction and triggered an enormous U.S. effort to combat [terrorism](#). Some 2,750 people were killed in New York, 184 at the [Pentagon](#), and 40 in [Pennsylvania](#) (where one of the hijacked planes crashed after the passengers attempted to retake the plane); all 19 terrorists died. Police and fire departments in New York were especially hard-hit: hundreds had rushed to the scene of the attacks, and more than 400 police officers and firefighters were killed.

We **still** mourn the devastation, and we are **still** deeply affected.

But, I'm afraid we may still carry fear, distrust, hatred and anger against all Muslims for this terrorist action conducted by an extremist group. A [Pew Research Center survey](#) conducted in 2017 asked Americans to rate members of nine religious groups on a "feeling thermometer" from 0 to 100, where 0 reflects the coldest, most negative possible rating and 100 the warmest, most positive rating. Overall, Americans gave Muslims the lowest rating -- an average rating of 48 degrees, lower than the rating even for atheists who rated 50. That's a pretty cold rating. <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/how-the-u-s-general-public-views-muslims-and-islam/>

So perhaps it is time for us to be reconciled with one another relying on God's reconciling power. Perhaps it is time we learned about our Muslim neighbors and the Muslim faith. Perhaps it is time for us to understand that extremist groups don't reflect the views of the majority of the people. So first, think about this: you have probably heard about the Westboro Baptist Church. But from its actions, it doesn't seem to be a church at all. The Westboro Baptist Church is known for inflammatory [hate speech](#), especially against [LGBTQ+](#) people, [Catholics](#), [Orthodox Christians](#), [atheists](#), [Muslims](#), [Jews](#), and U.S. soldiers and politicians. This hate group uses its Christian faith not to share the love of God, but as a platform to spread hate and violence. The actions and views of the Westboro Baptist Church don't reflect our views as Christians.

The Ku Klux Klan, another well-known hate group, relies upon its so called "white Christian faith" to engage in hatred and violence -- these views and actions don't reflect our Christian faith, either!

We are horrified that these hate groups twist their faith in Christ to justify what they do! Likewise, the vast majority of Muslims want us to know that violence and terrorism are not expressions of their faith. Instead hatred and violence are a perversion of the truth of their faith.

Today, I invite you to learn about the second largest religion in the world, the faith held by 24% of the world's population. Almost 2 billion of our neighbors are of the Muslim faith and about 3 million people in the US are Muslim. So let's talk about the facts.

First of all Islam is one of the Abrahamic faiths. That is, Islam is one of the faiths that descended from the worship of the one God of Abraham, the God of the ancient Israelites. The

three largest of these Abrahamic faiths are Judaism, Christianity and Islam. So you will see similarities among these three. It is the Islamic tradition that **Muhammad**, as an **Arab**, is descended from Abraham's son **Ishmael**. You may remember that Ishmael was Abraham's oldest son, born to Abraham and **Sarah's** servant **Hagar** (**Genesis 16:3**). Jewish tradition also equates the descendants of Ishmael, **Ishmaelites**, with Arabs, while the descendants of Isaac by Jacob, who was also later known as Israel, are the Israelites.<sup>[16]</sup> Therefore, in Islam's sacred text the Quran, you will see materials drawn from both the Old and New Testaments. "The Quran mentions the Torah, the Psalms and the gospel of Jesus multiple times as coming from God." However, Muslims believe these texts were distorted and that the Quran is the definitive word of God that corrects mistakes made before.

The story of Islam begins with Muhammed who lived about 600 years after the time of Christ. Similar to the Buddha, Muhammed's early life was tragic - his father died a few months before his birth, and his mother died when he was about 6 years old. He then lived with his grandfather who passed away shortly thereafter, and he spent the rest of his childhood living with his uncle in Mecca in Saudi Arabia. As an adult, Muhammed became very spiritual and developed an interest and respect for both Jews and Christians. When he was about 40, he sought a place of quiet solitude and went to a cave in a mountainside overlooking Mecca where he heard a voice tell him to "recite." The words he began to speak he believed to be the direct words of God coming through the angel Gabriel. The words were eventually put into written form and became the Quran. Muhammad began to preach and teach about these messages, and he gained followers. In the Islamic faith Muhammad is seen as the greatest and final prophet of the one true God.

### Basics of Islam

Islam \_\_\_\_\_ the word translated as "surrender" or "submission; also connected with "peace," reflecting the inner peace that comes from surrender to God.

A Muslim \_\_\_\_\_ is one who submits or surrenders to God.

Ka'bah \_\_\_\_\_ an ancient shrine in Mecca that has become Islam's holiest site.

Allah \_\_\_\_\_ the shortened version of the Arabic word for the one God worshiped by Jews and Christians.

Quran \_\_\_\_\_ an Arabic word that means "recitations;" the sacred text of Islam; believed to be messages from God given to Muhammad from \_\_\_\_\_ the Angel Gabriel \_\_\_\_\_. (the verbatim word of God)

An imam \_\_\_\_\_ is a teacher in an Islamic mosque.

Five Pillars of Islam:

1. Shahada \_\_\_\_\_ *Confession of faith*: "I bear witness to this truth. There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet."
2. Salat \_\_\_\_\_ *Prayer*. Five times a day, Muslims kneel in prayer facing Mecca, bowing to the ground and reciting portions of the Quran.

3. Zakat *Giving to the poor.* A required offering of 2.5% of one's accumulated wealth given yearly to help the poor, the needy, new converts and others.
4. Sawm *Fasting during Ramadan.* Once year Muslims fast from dawn to dusk for a month. Commemorates the first vision given to Muhammad and marks the flight from Mecca to Medina.
5. Hajj Pilgrimage to Mecca. Those who are physically and financially able make a once in a lifetime pilgrimage which includes walking around the Ka'bah seven times. Challenge -- Google video of it!!

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2017/08/hajj-2017-depth-sacred-journey-170824132159144.html>

You are probably already thinking about the similarities and differences between Islam and Christianity. We Christ followers are called to pray, fast, and care for the poor. We are called to tithe. Although it is not required, many Christians make pilgrimage journeys to the Holy Land. And our core belief is in the one true God.

I learned that according to the Quran, Jesus was born to Mary, a virgin. Muslims believed that Jesus worked miracles. He taught with wisdom and understanding, and he was the Jewish Messiah. However, Muslims view Jesus only as a great prophet. For Muslims, Jesus was not the Word of God made flesh- he was not God incarnate. He was not the savior of the world. In fact, Muslims do not even believe that Jesus died on the cross at all- but that someone else died on the cross and Jesus was taken up to heaven to avoid the cross. So while we have many similarities, Islam disagrees with our core belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus for the salvation of the world. Christianity and Islam take completely opposite paths at this point. Nevertheless, can't we still begin to know, appreciate, and love our Muslim neighbors? In fact, isn't that what it means to walk the walk and talk the talk of our faith?

A couple of summers ago I took a world religions class in seminary. And one of the requirements was that I attend a religious experience from a faith that was not my own. I was living in Russellville at the time, and there had been a mosque that had recently been opened. You wouldn't think there would be a large Muslim population there, but what I learned is that there was a fairly large group of Saudi Arabian students and faculty at Arkansas Tech; Saudi Arabia is 97% Muslim. And so the mosque had been set up for this group not just to have a place to pray and worship, but also a place to gather -- it is a community center of sorts. So I arranged a visit with some of the leaders who invited me to their Friday afternoon service of prayer. Now Saudi Arabia is very conservative in its beliefs, and very restrictive about the role and rights of women in their country. So I knew that there would probably be some restrictions placed on me being there as a female. I was asked to wear a scarf on my head, and I was told that I would be able to observe from an adjoining side room where the women and children go to participate in prayer. However, when I got there, the Imam had set up a chair along the back wall of the room. He invited me to sit in the back---right in the main room, and he handed me a Quran -- which was very beautiful. I deeply appreciated being trusted with Islam's holy book. Men began arriving and knelt in straight lines across the space. The imam stood at the front of the room and began reading in Arabic from the Quran, and at the appropriate times the men would respond verbally, and they would bow down to the ground pressing their foreheads to the floor in an act of submission and praise to God. The men continued to come in -- some older, but most of them were students -- young men in their late teens or early twenties. A few women

and children came in and went to the side room. As people came in they kneeled and joined in on the prayer process. Until the room was filled with rows of young men.

Rhythmically praying,  
bending over in submission,  
pressing their foreheads to the floor  
and coming back to an upright kneeling position.  
Repeating this process over and over.

I have never experienced such an overwhelming experience of prayer and submission before God. I witnessed 75 young men, pressing their foreheads to the ground to honor God, to worship God and to submit to God. This experience was deeply impactful for me. I will always respect and honor Islam as I witnessed it being practiced that day. May we Christians be so deeply committed to pray; may we practice submitting to God! May we teach our young people to do the same!

I want to challenge you today to google *The Secret Life of Muslims*. It is a tv show that describes the lives of ordinary US Muslims -- it is fascinating and a great learning experience. There are a series of 3-4 minute videos that are fantastic. One of the Muslims I learned about through this series is a man named Rais Bhuiyan who moved to Dallas from Bangladesh on May 21, 2001. He had grown up dreaming of coming to America. He said he watched western movies and he dreamed of seeing the wild, wild west. He got a job as a clerk at a convenience store.

All was well until the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Ten days later on 9/21 while he was clerking at the store, a man named Mark Stroman walked into the store with a double barreled shot-gun. Bhuiyan tried to give Stroman the money in the register, but Stroman asked, "Where are you from?" And then shot Bhuiyan in the face. Bhuiyan said it felt like a million bees stinging his face and then he heard the explosion of the shot. He described putting his hands to his head feeling like he needed to keep his brain from spilling out. The gunman was a white supremacist who was on a shooting rampage to kill as many Muslims as he could as revenge for 9/11. He shot 3 people that day -- 2 died. Bhuiyan survived but was permanently partially blind. The shooter was convicted of the murders and attempted murder and given the death penalty.

Afterward, Bhuiyan went to Hajj with his mother. While in Mecca his mother prayed that whatever her son wanted to do with his life that God would help him. Bhuiyan said that Islam taught him that saving one life is like saving mankind -- and his faith inspired him to go and do the right thing. So he did. He fought for the life of the man who had tried to kill him. He wrote to the courts time and time again asking for clemency -- even writing to the US Supreme Court. But clemency was not granted to the killer. Before Stroman was executed the shooter wrote a long letter to his victim, and the shooter was allowed to talk with his victim on the phone. Bhuiyan expressed his forgiveness and said he never hated him. Stroman said, "I love you bro." Bhuiyan said that in the past Stroman's heart had been filled with hate and ignorance, but when he came to know Bhuiyan, he came to see the Muslim man as a human being and to love him and to call him brother.

Bhuiyan has taken this experience and used it for good. He founded a nonprofit called World Without Hate which he said works to share the transformational power of mercy and forgiveness. He works to create hope for a world without victims, without violence and without hate. <http://www.secretlifeofmuslims.com/season-one>

You see throughout this sermon series on Christianity and World Religions, we haven't called you to give up your faith, we have called you to live out your faith. We have called you to be ambassadors for Christ in the world. We have encouraged you to get to know your neighbors as human beings and to love them. Really love them.

May we all experience the transformational power of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit who teaches us to forgive and to be merciful. May our work as Christ's ambassadors inspire hope for a world without victims, without violence and without hatred. In the name of Christ Jesus our Lord we pray. Amen.