

**Christianity and World Religions:
ISLAM**

Genesis 17:18-20

A sermon preached by
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It was an unforgettable moment in history. Almost everyone who was an adult (and some much younger) can remember what they were doing when they heard of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Three thousand people died that day; 6,000 were injured; damage was estimated at \$10 billion. Among the dead were 19 Islamic hijackers, members of the al-Qaeda terrorist group, who flew the planes into their suicidal targets screaming “*Allahu Akbar!* God is great!”

The 9/11 attacks began a new era in American and world politics. Most of us had little knowledge of Islam or acquaintance with Muslims. Many voices cried out in anger and rage that the Muslims were bent on destroying our country. Acts of hate and violence escalated against Muslims across the country.

In Dallas, Texas, Mark Stroman, a white supremacist, shot three store clerks, killing two, because he thought they looked like Muslims. The man who survived the attack was a Muslim originally from Bangladesh named Rais Bhuiyan. He lost sight in one eye and had to undergo multiple surgeries to repair his injury. But Rais Bhuiyan forgave his attacker. Mark Stroman was sentenced to death. Rais went to work to try to get clemency for this killer who had tried to take his life. He said, “In Islam it says that saving one human life is the same as saving the entire mankind. Since I forgave him, all those principles encouraged me to go even further, and stop his execution and save another human life.” Stroman eventually expressed remorse for the killings and admiration for Rais. On the day he was executed, Stroman put Rais on his list of last phone calls. On the phone, Rais told Mark that he never hated him and that he had forgiven him from the first. Mark called Rais his brother and told him he loved him.

Rais Bhuiyan now has a non-profit called World Without Hate and advocates for education and understanding across the country.¹

The questions posed by this sermon series are fairly simple. Can we live together in peace, understanding, and mutual respect with people of other faiths? Can we share the love of Jesus with those who are not followers of Jesus? Can we rise above the hatred and hostility and division that we see in our world today?

In February, Pope Francis, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, and Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, a respected leader of the Sunni Muslims, who make up 85% of Muslims, signed an amazing joint statement. It was called a “Document on Human Fraternity.” The document, a sort of manifesto of peace for two religions whose followers have been at odds for centuries, called upon “all concerned to stop using religions to incite hatred, violence, extremism and blind fanaticism, and to refrain from using the name of God to justify acts of murder, exile, terrorism and oppression.”

The declaration added that “the pluralism and the diversity of religions” was willed by God, and, “therefore, the fact that people are forced to adhere to a certain religion or culture must be rejected.” And in a world where Christians, Jews, and Muslims have been massacred at worship and suffered the desecration and vandalism of their sacred houses, the document says that “protection of places of worship—synagogues, churches and mosques—is a duty guaranteed by religions, human values, laws and international agreements.”² Then Francis and el-Tayeb laid the cornerstones for a new church and mosque to be built side by side in Abu Dhabi.

So yes. The answer is yes. Yes, we can live together with people of other faiths. Yes, we can rise above the hatred, hostility, fear, prejudice, and suspicion of people who are not like us. Yes, we can love all people like Jesus loves us—and them!

The religion we are considering today is Islam. The name of the religion means “surrender” or “submission,” because it is about surrendering to God. The word is also related to the Arabic *salaam*, similar to the Hebrew *shalom*, which means “peace.” A believer in this religion of submission is called a Muslim—“one who surrenders.”

Islam was founded by the prophet Muhammad, who lived in what is now Saudi Arabia from 570 to 632 A.D. Muhammad was born in Mecca, a city of culture and commerce and many faiths. There is a shrine in Mecca called the Ka’bah, which in Muhammad’s time held idols of all the tribal deities in the area. But Muhammad was intrigued by his interactions with Jews and Christians who professed belief in one God. The Arabic for “the God”

is *al Illah*, which was shortened to *Allah*. This is the name for the same God the Jews and Christians worshipped.

Muhammad was known for his honesty in business and his spirituality, and when he was around forty, he had an experience in prayer that changed his life. He felt a crushing weight on his chest and heard the angel Gabriel commanding him to “Recite!” He began to speak words he had never heard, and his friends began to write them down, because Muhammad could not read or write. These recitations became the scripture of Islam, called the Quran, which means “recitations.”

Muhammad eventually made a pilgrimage from Mecca to Medina, where the city was more open to his teaching. Then he returned to Mecca and captured it, re-dedicating the Ka’bah to the worship of the one God. So Muhammad also became a political and military leader, similar to Joshua or the kings of Israel. He died in 632 A.D., but his followers spread the religion of Islam quickly throughout the Middle East, north Africa, and southern Europe, and eventually around the world. Today, Islam is second in number only to Christianity, with 1.8 billion followers. There are about 3½ million Muslims in the United States, only a little over 1% of our population.³

The beliefs of Islam are contained in the Quran. They believe that the words of the Quran are the words of God, dictated by the angel Gabriel to the prophet Muhammad. The imams, who are the spiritual leaders of the mosque (analogous to the pastor in the church) memorize the entire Quran so it is always in their mind and available for teaching and guidance.

The Quran shows the influence of Jewish and Christian thought on Muhammad. Jesus is mentioned 70 times. There is a chapter on Mary the mother of Jesus. Many figures from the Old Testament are mentioned. There are many overlapping ideas. At the same time, Muhammad considered the Quran to be the definitive and perfect word of God. It mentions Jewish and Christian scriptures in an effort to correct the mistakes that were made in the earlier transmissions.

The basic teaching of the Quran can be summarized in The Five Pillars of Islam. The first pillar is the *Shahada*—the confession of faith. The basic

affirmation of faith for Muslims is, “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet.”

The second pillar is the *Salat* or prayers. Muslims kneel in prayer five times a day, facing Mecca, reciting verses from the Quran. They bend over and touch their foreheads to the ground in a posture of submission to God.

The third pillar of Islam is *Zakat*—charity to the poor. Faithful Muslims are generous, just like faithful Christians. While the standard for Jews and Christians is the tithe or 10% of annual income, the standard *zakat* for Muslims is 2.5% of all a person’s wealth (total net worth) in each given year. (You can do your own math to see if it would be more or less expensive to be a Christian or a Muslim!)

The fourth pillar is *Sawm*, or fasting. Muslims have an annual season for fasting, sort of like Christians have Lent. They fast from dawn to dusk during the month of Ramadan. This season commemorates Muhammad’s first vision of Gabriel and the flight from Mecca to Medina.

The fifth and final pillar of Islam is the *Hajj* or pilgrimage. At least once in a lifetime, every Muslim who can afford it tries to make a pilgrimage to Mecca. Once in Mecca, pilgrims gather at the Ka’bah and walk around it seven times (like Joshua at Jericho, right?). This is the holiest place in Islam, similar to the Western Wall in Jerusalem for the Jews or the empty tomb for Christians.

Obviously, we share much in common with Islam. There is so much shared history. Christians, Jews, and Muslims all trace their heritage to father Abraham in Genesis. 55% of the people on the planet are spiritual children of Abraham. Arabic or Islamic peoples trace their lineage through Ishmael, the firstborn son of Abraham through his wife’s servant Hagar.

We believe like Muslims in the one God, prayer, fasting, and generosity to the poor and needy.

Our attitude toward God is like the root word of Muslim—submission and surrender. E. Stanley Jones, the Methodist missionary, repeatedly said that self-surrender is the key to understanding Christianity, the central act that releases the Holy Spirit in our lives. At our best, Christians and Muslims are people of *salaam*, peace; at our worst, we are not.

There are, of course, differences between Christianity and Islam. We do not accept the Quran as the definitive word of God. We do not believe that it was dictated word for word by the angel Gabriel. Even Muhammad heard the inspiration of God with human ears, and all holy writings are filtered through somebody's historical situation, cultural context, attitudes, concerns, fears and hopes. Same way with our Bible. We do not believe God's perfect revelation was a book; we believe it was a Person—Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Word made flesh, God among us, and our interpretation of Scripture is filtered through the perfect revelation of God in God's Son.

Of course, the understanding of Jesus is different between Muslims and Christians. They see Jesus as a prophet, second only to Muhammad—but still second. To Muslims, Jesus was not divine any more than Muhammad was. They were both divinely inspired men. Muhammad was an ardent monotheist—one God only. The Trinity made no sense to him. The sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross made no sense to him. In fact, the Quran says Jesus sidestepped the cross and someone else died in his place. Muhammad was attempting from the span of six centuries to correct a “misunderstanding” that was testified by all four Gospels and the early church within years of its historical occurrence. So clearly there is a difference in belief.

The last thing I want to visit about today is the idea of violence in Islam. There is certainly a small minority within the Muslim faith that is violent—al Qaeda, ISIS, other terrorist groups. We are right to protect our security against any violent extremist group. But you can go on the internet or read newspapers and find many people who say Islam as a whole is not a religion of peace, but of hatred and violence, particularly against Christians and Jews. This despite the vast majority of Islamic teaching and the example of the vast majority of Muslim people.

It's like calling Christianity a religion of violence. There are certain texts in the Christian Bible, mostly in the Old Testament, that advocate for violence—against enemies, against sinners, even against family members. Christians historically have been involved in horrible violence against people of other faiths; read about the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, or

the Holocaust in Germany. There are so-called Christians today who support violence against other faiths, other races, or LGBTQ people.

We know that's not true to the spirit of Christianity. Our whole religion is based on love and grace and peace and hope, not violence. If people would take the larger view of Christianity, they would know that to be true.

Our call as Christians in relationship with Muslims is to take the larger view. We are not to confuse the mainstream of Islam with the radical extremist groups who are a danger to everyone. We are to affirm the beliefs we share in common, acknowledge our differences honestly, and live together in a spirit of *salaam*, *shalom*, peace.

One of the best examples of this spirit of *salaam* happened right here in Fort Smith a couple of years ago. It was even reported in *The New York Times*. In October of 2016, Abraham Davis, age 20, and two friends got drunk and vandalized the Masjid Al Salam on South 28th Street. Abraham (Isn't the name ironic?) did not paint the swastikas and profanity on the mosque, but he drove the car and kept watch. He was involved.

And he was immediately sorry for what he had done. Four months later, he was arrested, and not being able to make bail, he sat in the Sebastian County Jail. From jail, he wrote a letter of apology to the people of the mosque, saying, "I'm so sorry about having a hand in vandalizing your mosque. It was wrong and y'all did not deserve to have that done to you. I hurt y'all and I am haunted by it. ...I wish I could undo the pain I helped to cause."⁴

Abraham's brother delivered the letter to the mosque on Friday afternoon as the congregation was gathering for worship. Dr. Louay Nassri (who will be my guest in class this Wednesday) read the letter and met with the leaders of the mosque. They decided to forgive Abraham and his co-defendants. They asked the legal system for mercy on the boys who had done this.

The desecration of the mosque had actually brought unexpected blessings. Many people of all faiths had responded to the vandalism with calls and letters of support, as well as coming by to help clean up the mess. One of the leaders of the mosque said that the crime had actually made the mosque more visible in the community and built new relationships.

The judge granted the mosque’s request for mercy, giving the boys probation, fines and community service, but no prison. Abraham wanted to meet personally with the people at the mosque, but both the prosecutor and his public defender advised against that. So he posted on Facebook the night he got home from jail, “I’m home now. I just want to say thank you to all those who have been supporting me and a big thanks to the guys at the mosque who have been supportive and helpful, and I pray blessings over them.”

One of his friends from Southside High School, a member of the mosque, replied, “Bro move on with life we forgave you from the first time you apologized don’t let that mistake bring you down.” And then this: “I speak for the whole Muslim community of fort smith we love you and want you to be the best example in life we don’t hold grudges against anybody!”

Last year, because they had received a number of contributions following the vandalism, the mosque paid Abraham Davis’ fine for his crimes. That’s forgiveness in action.

There is an Islamic blessing that goes, “*As Salaam Alaykum.*” It means “Peace be upon you.” In this world filled with hatred, violence, prejudice, and misunderstanding, we can be different. We can be better. We can be agents of peace—between faith groups or between any group where difference creates conflict. We have nothing more important to contribute than the love of Jesus that leads to peace. *As salaam alaykum.* Amen.

¹ <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/secret-life-of-muslims/>.

² <https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2019/feb/05/pope-drops-tact-in-uae-visit-20190205/?latest>.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_country.

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/26/us/fort-smith-arkansas-mosque-vandalism-and-forgiveness.html>.