

To a Muslim the idea that God could be a spirit or have human characteristics is blasphemous in that it reduces Allah to a human concept.

Small wonder then that the idea that God could reveal himself and his nature in human form as Jesus of Nazareth is an offence to the Islamic mind. Similarly the Holy Spirit as God working powerfully and lovingly in and through the lives of his people is to a Muslim virtually inconceivable. Muslims regard the concept of the Trinity as a form of polytheism.

In simple terms, Christianity views God not simply as knowable but desiring to be known by his created people through Jesus, while Islam sees Allah as being largely unknowable, his will being revealed through his prophet.

The biggest contrast between these two faiths is found in the nature of the dynamic relationship that exists between God and his human creation. For Islam there is only the hope that sustained obedience may, on balance, win the favour of a remote and unknowable Allah, something for which there can be no certainty.

"Every man's actions have we hung around his neck, and on the last day shall be laid before him a wide-open book."

Qur'an 17:13

They reject any idea that Jesus was crucified and later resurrected.

"They denied the truth and uttered a monstrous falsehood against Mary. They declared: 'We have put to death the Messiah Jesus the son of Mary the apostle of Allah.' They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but they thought they did.. They have no knowledge thereof but the pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain, but God took him up to Himself."

Qur'an 4:154-158

But for Christians God is Love by his very nature, although no less the Divine Judge to whom all must give account. He cares for the people he created in his own image, a term which ascribes to Humankind such God-like qualities as the possession of free-will, reason and intelligence,

and the ability to love. Through the birth, perfect life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, being no less himself than God made flesh, he has enabled the reconciliation of sinful people and perfect God. John's Gospel in the Bible describes this act of salvation as a promise.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him "

John 3.16-17

This restored relationship is something of which Christians can be sure. They can live their lives with the certainty that they belong to God's family forever in a relationship founded on love and gratitude.

"God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God and God abides in him. In this is love perfected with us, that we may have confidence for the day of judgment because as he is so are we in the world"

1 John 4.16-17

Questions for Consideration

1. If a Muslim accused you of being a believer in more than one god, how would you explain the Trinity to him?
2. What theme for discussion would you choose in order to talk to a Muslim about Jesus?
3. What is prophecy? To what extent was Jesus a prophet? How much more than a prophet was Jesus? Heb 10.11-18
4. How would you argue from the events of real life about the existence of Good and Evil in the world and where it originates from?
5. In what ways has God made himself known to his world throughout history?
6. How does Jesus reveal the very fullness of God?
7. How important is the resurrection of Jesus to Christian belief? Why? 1 Cor 15.12-19
8. Exactly what is our relationship with God?

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Islam and Christianity

Series

No. 1

Fundamental Beliefs



Islam is the faith of over a thousand million people world-wide and is the second largest religion in the world. The word itself means *submission* and its followers are called *Muslims*. There are subgroups within the religion, the two largest of which are the *Sunnis*, by far the most numerous group, and the *Shi'ites*.

Islam has often been described as the simplest religion of all and many have found this to be its most attractive feature. Muslims hold the view that Islam is the original religion of Humankind, the religion of Adam, and that all other religions are corruptions. It is a perception that is crucial to understanding Islam and, in particular, its concepts of blasphemy, conversion, apostasy, tolerance, civil rights and religious debate.

At its heart is a belief in one god, *Allah*, whose nature is described in the *Qur'an*, the Islamic holy book, as

"...God, the One and Only; God, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him."

Qur'an 112.1-4

The *Five Pillars of Islam* are five practices essential to Sunni Islam. Shi'a Muslims subscribe to eight ritual practices which substantially overlap with the Five Pillars. The five pillars are:

- The *shahadah*, which is the basic creed of Islam:

"I testify that there is none worthy of worship except God and I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of God."

Muslims must repeat the *shahadah* in prayer, and non-Muslims wishing to convert to Islam are required to recite the creed.

- *Salah*, or ritual prayer, which must be performed five times a day. Each *salah* is carried out facing towards Mecca. The prayers mostly consist of verses from the *Qur'an*.
- *Zakat*, or alms-giving. This is the practice of giving based on accumulated wealth, and is obligatory for all Muslims who can afford it. A fixed portion is spent to help the poor or needy, and also to assist the spread of Islam.

- *Sawm*, or fasting during the month of Ramadan. Muslims must not eat or drink (as well as other things) from dawn to dusk during this month, and must focus attention on their sins.
- The *Hajj*, which is the pilgrimage to Mecca. Every able-bodied Muslim who can afford it must make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his or her lifetime.

Shi'a Muslims consider three additional practices essential to the religion of Islam. The first is *jihad*, meaning "striving or struggle", which is also important to the Sunni, but not considered a pillar. The second is *Amr-Bil-Ma'ruf*, the "Enjoining to Do Good", which calls for every Muslim to live a virtuous life and to encourage, even force, others to do the same. The third is *Nahi-Anil-Munkar*, the "Exhortation to Desist from Evil", which tells Muslims to refrain from vice and evil actions and also to encourage or force others to do the same.

Islam was founded by Muhammad (570-630 AD), who was an Arab religious, political, and military leader and is regarded by Muslims as the last and greatest of the prophets. They would dispute his role as a "founder" of their religion, preferring instead to see him as the one who purified the monotheistic religions of the day, i.e. Christianity and Judaism. Muslims recognise Jesus, Moses and Elijah, among others, as prophets of Islam, but argue that their teachings became corrupted over time. It was to Muhammad that God revealed his ultimate truth.

After his death a dispute arose which split Islam. It was over who had the right of succession to being the leader of the Islamic world. Sunnis acknowledge that Abu Bakr was the rightful successor while the Shi'ites trace their origins of loyalty to Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law. Among other things the Shi'ites believe that their Imam is infallible and can do no sin.

Over the years, a system of Islamic law, called *shari'ah*, a word which means "law" and is used in the Arabic Bible for the law of God in the Old Testament, has developed. It is basically an accumulation of rulings that embrace virtually all aspects of life and society, from diet to government to human relationships to etiquette.

Incorporated into Islam is a range of other beliefs includ-

ing angels, resurrection and judgement, heaven, hell, and a form of predestination, understood as Allah having both foreknowledge and control of everything that happens. Nonetheless humans have free-will only insofar as they are able to choose between right or wrong.

Concepts of good and evil, however, are more varied. Sunnis subscribe to the view that nothing is good or evil as such, and that what Allah commanded people to do became good by virtue of his command, and what he forbade became evil.

Shi'ites, by contrast, believe that there is intrinsic good or evil in things, and that Allah commands them to do the good things and shun the evil.

There are today conservative and liberal elements in Islam. The main difference between them is the range of interpretations as to how to apply the core Islamic values to modern life. Among other things, liberal Muslims are able to embrace such issues as human rights and secular, democratic societies while conservatives see Islam as a political as well as a religious movement.

The liberal Muslim's focus is on individual interpretation and ethics, rather than on the literal word of scripture which is more characteristic of conservative Islamic thinking.

By Contrast

Although Christians share with Muslims a belief in one God., the Christian understanding of the nature of God is very different from that of Muslims.

The Christian understanding is summed up in the Westminster Shorter Catechism,

"God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth."

which goes on to say

"There are three persons to the Godhead; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and these are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory"