

A Basic Brief Introduction to Islam

"But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander." (1 Pet. 3:15-16)

We want to learn how we can give an answer to the growing number of Muslims – often students or refugees – we find now in Western countries as well as to those in Muslim majority countries. Many westerners have no background with regard to Islam, yet the number of Muslims is growing. In the USA there are 5 million Muslims and there are over 1.9 billion worldwide.

I hope this paper will cover:

- a. What they teach and believe
- b. How we, as Christians, should respond to them

I have had a great learning experience living with Muslims and travelling among them. I have lived and studied in the Arab World and I taught in a medical school in Saudi Arabia. My wife and I have also lived and worked in Jordan and Lebanon. We have travelled in Iraq, Syria and many other Arab countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Sudan, Algeria and Morocco. I have also visited Iran, Pakistan and Malaysia.

So I would like to share with you something of what we have learned about living among our Muslim friends. Muslims are very easy to love since fundamentally they are 'God-fearing' people. We have a great love for Muslims as people. We don't want to attack or tear down any individual. The key is to seek to really understand what Muslims believe and practice.

Islam began with Muhammad. In the 7th century A.D. he claimed to have had revelations from an angel of light that brought him a revelation from God. Much in these revelations is contrary to what has been revealed to us in the Bible.

We read in Jude 3, ***"Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints."***

Here is a brief background to the history of Islam, its beliefs and how we should respond to them. Islam spread rapidly. In the last 50 years the number of Muslims has increased by 255% to about 1.9 billion worldwide. This is just over 24% of the world's population. So it is vitally important that we reach these people with the Gospel. The Lord Jesus will return! We are told what will trigger His return, ***"This Gospel will be proclaimed in all nations and then the end will come."*** (Mt. 24:14) Islam now dominates 52 countries. Only 20% of Muslims come from the Middle East.

When most people in the British Isles think about Muslims they think about the Middle East – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, etc. But Indonesia has ~229 million Muslims. There are only ~235 million Muslims in the whole of the Arab World. Bangladesh has about ~154 million and Pakistan has ~200 million. India has ~189 million Muslims. China has ~63 million Muslims. Russia has a belt of Islamic states on its southern borders with ~50 million Muslims. Turkey has ~80 million Muslims and Iran has ~82.5 million.

So Muslims are not just from the Middle East. They are spread throughout much of Asia and the northern part of Africa. Islam is now the second largest religion within Europe! We have over 4 million Muslims in Britain with nearly 2000 mosques. In the last few years over 400 Christian churches have been converted into mosques.

In France in 1974 there was **officially** only one mosque in the whole of France. There are now over 2,300 mosques in France with a further 200 planned. Even in the USA, 30 years ago there were

relatively few Muslims. Now there are over 5 million Muslims who have built mosques in nearly every city in the USA with a population of over 3.5 million. They are actively recruiting converts on university campuses. Nearly every university in the USA has a Muslim Student Union/Association.

The tragedy is that though we may realise about one sixth of the people in the world are Muslim, this is the least evangelised group of people by believers in the Lord Jesus in the last several hundred years. Only about 2% of North American Christian workers are seeking to reach Muslims. Roughly 800 North American workers are seeking to reach 1.8 billion Muslims – one for 13 million Muslims!

So we need to pray that God will lay on our hearts a burden for these people – people God loves! He longs for them to know the truth. We need many more workers among Muslim peoples. There are many opportunities for professionals to work in Muslim countries and share their faith.

A Brief History of Islam

It began with a man named Muhammad who was born in 570 A.D. – nearly 600 years after the Lord Jesus. He was born in Mecca in present-day Saudi Arabia. Muslims believe Muhammad was a descendant of Abraham. In Genesis God promised Abraham he would make his descendants into a great nation (Genesis 17) and through Abraham all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

God promised a son to Abraham. We read that Abraham was 99 years old and Sarah, his wife, was 90 years old. Abraham said to God, in effect, "What happened to your promise? You promised to make me into a great nation and bless all the nations of the world through me. But until now I have not even had a son." God said to Abraham, "I have promised you a son."

The great tragedy was that Abraham didn't trust God. He took into his own hands the fulfilment of the promise that God was going to give him a son. Instead of trusting God, he took their maidservant, Hagar (Mt. 16) and she gave him a son called Ishmael. Centuries later Ishmael became the father of the Arab nations.

After that God fulfilled his promise to Abraham and his wife and they had a second son called Isaac. It was through Isaac that God's promise was fulfilled for Isaac became the progenitor of the Jewish nation and the Messiah, the Lord Jesus, would come and bless all nations. But sadly through Abraham's failure to trust God he had a son by Hagar and now for 4000 years there has been conflict between the descendants of Ishmael and the descendants of Isaac – the Arabs and the Jews – this is a direct result of Abraham's disobedience and unfaithfulness and it is still going on today. It is a serious warning to us all. We must learn to trust God. What took place in Genesis 17 is still controlling world events especially in the Middle East.

So Islam began with Muhammad. His father named him and his name in Arabic means 'the praised one'. His father died on a business trip selling merchandise up in Syria when Muhammad was in his early years. Not long after this his mother also died. So Muhammad was mainly raised by his grandfather and his uncle in Mecca.

In the 6th century A.D. Mecca was an important centre of trade and other religions. There was a shrine there – the Kaaba – a cube-shaped building. All Muslims should go there at least once in their life and walk round the Kaaba seven times. It is the holiest shrine in Islam. Inside the Kaaba there is a little black stone. Muslims claim it was built by Abraham as a temple to God. The stone is probably a meteorite. It is surrounded by thick silver and Muslims go to it and touch it or kiss it.

Prior to Muhammad, this area of Mecca was a centre of idolatry and polytheism. Apparently there were 360 idols around the Kaaba while Muhammad was growing up in Mecca. As he grew up, he began to question the validity of these idols.

Aged 25 Muhammad married a lady 15 years his senior. She was 40 years old when they married and she bore Muhammad four daughters and two sons but both sons died in infancy. Muhammad was faithful to Khadija until she died at the age of 65.

When Muhammad turned 40 years old in 610 A.D., he was a seeker after truth. He was seeking to know God. He often went to a cave 3 miles south of Mecca together with a few other "holy" men and they would meditate. In 610 A.D. Muhammad said he began to receive revelations from an angel of light he thought was Gabriel. He reported that Gabriel would come to him and give him a series of revelations from God. This continued over a period of 22 years. After his death these revelations were written down and today we know them as the Quran – the holy book of all Muslims. The word Quran in Arabic means recitations/revelations. For Muslims these are God's word given to Muhammad during these 22 years.

Muhammad reported that either he would see the Angel Gabriel or he would just hear a voice in the cave. Sometimes the angel would ring a bell or he would have dreams or thoughts in his mind in which he would get these revelations. Often he would begin to perspire or fall down in an epileptic fit. He would foam at the mouth as he received some of these revelations from the angel of light. The message was fairly simple – that there was no God but Allah and that Muhammad was his prophet. Man is God's slave and it is the first duty of man to submit to and obey Allah.

Islam, the name of the religion, means in Arabic 'submission'. A Muslim is one who has submitted himself/herself to the will of God.

Not only did Muhammad receive revelations that there was only one God – Allah, but also that he was to be a slave of Allah and submit to his will. Thirdly he received a revelation that there was coming a terrible day of judgement and the world would be shaken, the dead would be raised to life and all people would be judged. Some would be saved and rewarded by Allah and allowed to enter Paradise where they would be eat and drink and have young maidens for sensual pleasures as a reward.

Every non-Muslim would be condemned to hell with all evildoers. Muhammad began to preach these revelations throughout Mecca which was the centre of Arab worship with its 360 idols. Not surprisingly, the Meccans were not at all excited about Muhammad's revelations – there being only one God! Muhammad came under persecution from the local Arabs in Mecca and so in 622 A.D. he fled to Medina which is about 280 miles north of Mecca.

So 622 A.D. is the date Muslims now take as the beginning of Islam. It is Muhammad's "flight" to Medina that is seen by Muslims as their key date. Arab daily newspapers are dated in this way so 2019 A.D. is 1497 AH (after Hijra – the flight). So the official beginning of Islam was in 622 A.D.

It was in Medina that Muhammad preached his first sermon. It happened to be a Friday, so Friday became the official day of worship in Islam. On a Friday a Muslim should go to pray in a mosque. It was in Medina that Muhammad built the first mosque (an Arabic word meaning a meeting place). Here Muslims would pray and hear the Quran recited.

Medina also became a religious – political centre for Muhammad. It was during this time after Khadijah's death that Muhammad began to receive more revelations that continued for a period of many years. These revelations became more and more "convenient" for his immorality. An angel gave him a revelation that he was to loot and to kill and to pillage the camel caravans passing through Mecca. So Muhammad raised up an army and began to attack these caravans. They killed the camel drivers – thousands of them – and stole their belongings. This is how they supported themselves. They believed this was a revelation from God.

Muhammad then began to receive revelations that he was to drive all the Jews out of Arabia. It is clear that he had a vague understanding of the Bible and there was a large Jewish community in Medina as well as a small Christian community of different Christian sects. Muhammad was aware of the Old and New Testaments and the teachings of Jesus Christ, but he saw it in a perverted way. He reported that Allah had revealed to him that he should kill or drive out all Jews and Christians. Muslim historians record that after one battle against the Jews he captured 2000 men women and children. He had his followers dig a long trench and the prisoner's hands were tied behind their

backs their heads were severed and their bodies were thrown into the ditch as part of the last revelation to him.

It is interesting to read the Quran even in English translation. God is a God of power in the Quran – a God of sheer power. So Muhammad received revelations to kill and to steal. It is not surprising that we see in Muslim countries around the world a system of revenge and killing still going on between the Sunni and the Shia, between the Libyans and those in Chad or the Sudanese who recently killed thousands of Christians in southern Sudan. There is similar fighting between Muslims in Eritrea and Ethiopia as well and systematic slaughter of Christian tribes in northern Nigeria. All these are legitimised and encouraged by Muhammad on the basis of his "revelation".

Muhammad also began to receive revelations that he should take one wife after another. He was married 15 times and at his death he was living with 12 wives and 2 concubines. Whenever he saw an attractive young lady he would tell his other wives that he had received another revelation to take another wife. He also took slaves who would not be married to him but merely sexual partners and he said that Allah had willed this. So you see a consistent pattern in 20 years of Muhammad's time in Medina of claiming revelations from God in order to live out immoral behaviour and fulfil his sexual desires.

In 628 A.D. Muhammad received a revelation that Islam was to be exalted above all religions including Christianity. In 629 A.D. Muhammad raised an army of 10,000 men and they travelled the 280 miles south to Mecca and captured it. Then Muhammad became the supreme ruler of the whole of Arabia. He died on June 8, 832 A.D. at the age of 62.

After his death Islam was largely spread by the sword. There were mass murders immediately after his death as his followers went out to conquer Arabia by the sword. This is why Islam gained the name of religion by the sword.

Soon after Muhammad's death Arab armies swept across North Africa slaughtering anyone in their way. All infidels – i.e. non-Muslims – who wouldn't become Muslims by accepting Muhammad as a prophet were to be killed. When the Muslim armies came to Fez in Morocco ~700 A.D. there was a large Christian community who would not renounce their faith and they were slaughtered. Hundreds died.

Today Muslims form about 1/6 of the world's population. Islam tends to create turmoil wherever it goes. It is not a religion of love and compassion but a religion of hatred and death.

What do Muslims believe? As we have seen, Islam means submission to the will of Allah. A Muslim is one who has submitted. The Quran is the revelation (or recitation) given to Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel supposedly from God.

The Basic Beliefs of a Muslim

1. You become a Muslim by publicly declaring the basic creed of Islam that you believe in Allah as the true God and Muhammad is his apostle/prophet. This is the basic creed of all Muslims even though there are many different kinds of Muslims. There are Sunni Muslims as in Saudi Arabia. In Iran there are Shiite Muslims and in Lebanon there is a group called the Hezbollah (the party of God). No matter what group a Muslim belongs to, all Muslims hold this as their basic creed, **"There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his apostle"**.
2. The Quran teaches that God is the creator of all things. He sustains the universe by the word of his power and nothing happens without his will. God created man to be his slave and God requires obedience and worship. God will raise the dead and judge the world.
3. The Quran teaches that Allah has sent prophets to guide his people how to obey. The Quran teaches us that Allah has 99 names. In most Muslim countries you can see men walking in the street or sitting in a coffee shop with a string of beads in their hands – 33 beads. Arab leaders

seen on television often hold a string of beads and finger them as they talk. The purpose of the string of beads – 33 of them – is that each one helps the holder to recite quietly the 99 names of God that are found in the Quran. Arabs say that there are actually a hundred names for God but only the camel knows the hundredth name which is why he has such a haughty look as he walks about!

But of those 99 names found in the Quran it is interesting that not even one describes God as a God of love. Nothing indicates that he is Our Heavenly Father.

The predominant theme in Islam is that God is a God of sheer power. He determines everything that happens here on earth and in the universe. This concept of God produces a deep fatalism among Muslim peoples. Fatalism is that Allah wills whatever happens. He determines it. So man has no free choice. Throughout the Quran this theme is present. Man is merely a slave and he must submit to what Allah has willed.

That is why there appear to be so many problems: the Israeli-Palestinian problem, the Sunni/ Shia problem. There are 3 1/2 million to 4 million Palestinians living homeless in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

It is hard to understand the deep hatred between these two neighbours with common Semitic roots. In general in most Arab/Muslim countries there is fear and animosity between their own country and the neighbouring Muslim country. So Muslim unity is largely a myth. Fatalism is a basic cause of many of the problems.

Allah's will is a great excuse for Muslim politicians to do little to alleviate poverty and injustice. It is in Christianity that you see the value of a human life. This isn't present in Islam. Fatalism permeates all the values of life including the standard of living. There is a very strong belief that whatever Allah wills will happen – Islamic fatalism. This permeates the Muslim World because of their concept of God as a God of absolute power who wills and determines everything and where man has no choice.

Muslims also have a strong belief in angels. Angels can communicate to people as they did to Muhammad. They believe that when Allah created Adam God called on the angels to worship Adam. Satan refused and was cast out of heaven and is now man's chief enemy because he did not submit to Adam.

Islam teaches a belief in God's prophets. God sent prophets to guide people. The Quran lists 28 prophets that God sent. Many of these are Biblical prophets including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Muhammad is the last and greatest prophet. They believe that the law given by the prophets was in effect until that prophet was superseded by the next prophet. The last and greatest prophet was Muhammad. He is called "the seal of the prophets". No other prophet will come before the Day of Resurrection.

Muslims believe in "the Books of God". Islam is a religion of revelation. The Quran mentions the Old Testament and the New Testament. It mentions the gospel (the Injil) and the Lord Jesus. It also mentions the songs of David. All these are part of the Books of God and supremely the Quran given to Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel over a period of 22 years.

Muslims believe in resurrection and judgement. There will come a great and terrible day of judgement in which God will raise the dead and each person will have to cross the bridge called the Surat. This bridge is described as a thin thread over which all people must walk. Those that are true believers and faithful followers of Muhammad will make it over the bridge to the other side – to paradise. All others will fall into hell – a lake of fire.

A Muslim believes in the basic creed that God is One. They pride themselves on being monotheistic. Do we believe this? See James 2:19, ***"You believe that there is one God! Even demons believe that and shudder."*** It is not enough just to believe that God is One.

What does the Quran teach about the Lord Jesus?

- He is a very great Prophet.
- He was born of the Virgin Mary.
- He never sinned.
- He performed miracles such as opening the ears of the deaf and restoring sight to the blind.
- He raised the dead.
- He is both the word of God and the spirit of God.
- He will return to this earth to be ruler and judge of the world.

The Quran has much to say about the Lord Jesus. He is mentioned over 97 times.

Sadly most Muslims have rejected the Lord Jesus not because of who he really is that because they have never been presented with a clear picture of the Lord Jesus. Their view of him has been distorted by descriptions of the Trinity and the idea that we have deified a man.

Col. 1:15-17 says, ***“He (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created – things in heaven and things on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things and in Him all things hold together.”***

Sadly Muslims do not know that God loves them and has sent a Saviour to save them from the consequences of their sin and failures. They only believe that God has sent prophets to tell us what we must do – what we must submit to and obey. Islam is a religion of submission to the will of Allah. We can never know God in a personal way. A Muslim prays for mercy because he doesn't know the grace of God. He only knows the laws of God that he must submit to. In order to submit to these laws he must obey the five pillars of the Muslim faith. These five pillars are the core of the teaching of Islam.

1. **Prayer (Salat)**

A small prayer mat is needed as well as a knowledge of the direction of Mecca. Five times a day he must pray – sunrise – midday – mid-afternoon – sunset – after sunset. Ritual washing must take place before prayer to remove all uncleanness. Facing the direction of Mecca he says ritual prayers adopting ritual positions.

2. **Religious Tax (Zakat)**

This is to be paid for the relief of poorer Muslims by all those living above a subsistence level. It isn't seen as charity but as a rightful claim of the poor against the rich. When giving to beggars on the street they never respond with thanks since that may take away any reward Allah may give the giver.

3. **Fasting (Sawm)**

To show obedience to Allah and a willingness to forego the pleasures of life every Muslim must fast each year for the 30 days of the month of Ramadan in the Islamic calendar. According to tradition it was in this month that Muhammad received the first sura of the Quran from Allah.

Muslims may not eat, drink, smoke or have sexual relations from dawn to dusk. The 22nd day of the month is known as the “Night of Power”. The exact day is dependent on the arrival of the new moon. It's commemorates the actual day that Muhammad's revelations began.

4. **Pilgrimage to the Holy Kaaba in Mecca (the Hajj)**

All Muslims should make this pilgrimage at least once in their life. A number of set rituals are performed. On return from the pilgrimage a Muslim may call himself a Hajji.

5. The Defence of Islam (Jihad)

This is often called **'The Holy War'**. The literal translation of 'jihad' is 'striving' (to serve Allah). It is an obligation on all Muslims to wage jihad to the best of their ability. Muslims follow Muhammad's teaching that if you are killed in a jihad this is the one thing that gives you immediate entry into Paradise. Western Muslims claim that jihad is a 'spiritual' war and jihad is seeking to spread Islam by peaceful means.

Conclusion

What do Muslims teach regarding salvation? When Adam sinned nothing changed. Adam was still able to obey God completely. All humans are not sinful but they are ignorant. The reason for praying five times a day towards Mecca is not because a Muslim is a sinner but because he is forgetful. So praying five times a day helps to remember and obey Islamic laws and the commands of Allah.

A Muslim does not need a Saviour. He needs guides and teachers to tell him the right things to do. He believes that God has sent prophets to reveal his laws and commands and man must submit to these. This is why a Muslim prays, "God have mercy on me". He does not know the grace of God. For a Muslim God is unknowable.

In Romans 10:1-3 Paul writes about the Jews, ***"Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God but their zeal is not based on knowledge since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own. They did not submit to God's righteousness."*** The same can be said of many a Muslim. They have a zeal for God but not according to knowledge. They are seeking a righteousness of their own by keeping the laws and commands of the Quran rather than knowing God personally.

Galatians 3:13-14 puts it very plainly, ***"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree'. He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles (non-Jews) through Christ Jesus so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."***

Scripture makes it clear that the law was given by God to show us our sinfulness so we would realise how greatly it has destroyed our relationship with the God who loves us. It shows how far we fall short of the holiness of God. We need a Saviour. This is why the Lord Jesus came and we can only find fulfilment in Him.

The Lord Jesus came to set Muslims free! Sadly Muhammad enslaved people into a law that could save no one. He blurred the vision of God so they cannot see and know God as a Heavenly Father who loves them. They only see a stern dictator giving commands. But God broke into human history and took on human flesh not to give us laws and commands, but to give us Himself. As we come to Him in faith He will cleanse us from our sin and give us assurance of our salvation. He wants to give us the assurance that a Muslim cannot know – that the Lord Jesus has dealt our sin. He paid the price for it on the Cross. All those who accept His gift of salvation are forgiven and restored back into a relationship with God the Father – the Creator for whom we were made.