



# ISLAM

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A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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## **Islam**

### **A Catholic Perspective**

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Excerpts from the Bible taken from the *Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition* (RSV:CE) unless otherwise noted.

Excerpts from the Qur'an (Q) taken from N. J. Dawood, tr., *The Koran* (London: Penguin Books, 1999) unless otherwise noted.

#### Note on Arabic Words

It is difficult to transliterate Arabic words into the English alphabet. This is because Arabic has a large number of sounds not used in English. Over the years, different transliteration methods have been employed. In general, we will use more contemporary spellings, as these tend to give a somewhat better sense of what the Arabic word sounds like. We will retain a few traditional spellings when a contemporary one would be hopelessly confusing (thus *Mecca* rather than *Makkah*) or when the traditional usage is widespread (thus *Mohammed* rather than *Muhammad*). Also to prevent confusion we standardize the spellings of Arabic words in quotations from other sources (thus *Qur'an* rather than *Koran*).

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## Introduction

In recent years, due to the increasing interconnectedness of the globe, as well as the rise of many Islamic militant and terrorist movements, Christians in the West have wished to learn more about Islam and how it should be regarded. Unfortunately, there are not many resources offering a distinctly Christian perspective on the subject, and many of those that are available are problematic.

Some texts err in portraying Islam in an overly negative light, as if it were the synthesis of all evil. Other texts, perhaps out of a desire to reassure the public or perhaps out of considerations of political correctness, err on the other side in portraying Islam in an overly positive light.

This text intends to offer a balanced approach, giving Islam credit for its good points but refusing to paper over its negative points. It will also provide a Christian—and specifically a Catholic—appraisal of Islam, as well as considering points that might be raised in discussions between Christians and Muslims.

## I. The Basics

### **What is Islam?**

Islam is the world's second largest religion. It is thought to have as many as 1.2 billion members around the world, though this number may be somewhat inflated. Christianity, the world's largest religion, is thought to have two billion members.

The name *Islam* is the Arabic word for "submission" and refers to the submission of the Muslim faithful to God and to his will.

### **What are adherents of Islam called?**

The most common name for them is *Muslims*. The word *muslim* is Arabic for "one who has submitted [i.e., to God]." An older English spelling of this word is *Moslem*.

Muslims should not be referred to as *Mohammedans* nor Islam as *Mohammedanism*. These words are considered offensive as they are taken to imply that Muslims worship Mohammed the way Christians worship Christ.

### **Who founded Islam?**

Islam was founded by an Arabian man named Mohammed, the son of Abdullah. He was born in Mecca in what is now Saudi Arabia around the year A.D. 570. His family was well off, and his tribe served as the guardians of an ancient cubical shrine in Mecca known as the Ka'bah, which at the time was used for the worship of many different deities.

Mohammed's father died before he was born, and his mother died when he was young. He was raised by an uncle named Abu Talib, whose family was active in the caravan trading business. This brought Mohammed into contact with many peoples, including Jews and Christians, with whom he discussed religion.

Mohammed was employed to manage the caravan trading of a wealthy widow named Khadijah who was fifteen years older than he. Despite this, they married and had a number of children. Their only child to survive to adulthood was a daughter, Fatima.

After Khadijah's death, Mohammed began to practice polygamy and took other wives. Though in general Muslim men are allowed to take up to four wives, Mohammed took more than this (a precise count of how many is difficult to obtain). Among his more famous wives were 'Aisha, who was less than ten years old when he married her, and Zaynab, the former wife of Mohammed's adopted son, Zayd. (When Zayd saw that Mohammed desired Zaynab, he divorced her to make way for his adopted father to have her, a union that God supposedly endorsed in a revelation to Mohammed.)

Mohammed died in 632, following a tumultuous, twenty-three year prophetic career.

### **How did Islam start?**

Mohammed was accustomed to meditate in a cave on Mount Hira, just outside Mecca. In the month of Rammadan of 610, when Mohammed was around forty, he claimed to hear a voice (of God or the Angel Gabriel) that gave him the first of many reported revelations that were later collected together in the Muslim holy book, the *Qur'an* (Arabic, *reading* or *recitation*). He then began preaching to the people of his native city

what he claimed God was revealing to him.

At the time, the tribes of Arabia contained a mixture of different religions including large numbers of Christians, Jews, and pagans. The tribe of Mohammed's birth (the Quraysh) was predominantly pagan and protected the Ka'bah shrine in Mecca. Many of the Christians in Arabia were not orthodox in their faith, and so Mohammed's principal exposure to Christianity included heretical presentations of Christian doctrine, such as that of the Jacobite Christians, a group of Syrian Christians adhering to the monophysite heresy.

The reaction to Mohammed's early preaching was not enthusiastic. At first he made converts of only his wife, his nephew, and his adopted son, Zayd (a former slave that Khadijah had given him). He began to attract a few followers from outside his family, and the tiny Muslim community grew to a few dozen. The majority of Meccans regarded Mohammed with scorn, accusing him of recycling the legends of Jews, Christians, and others and suggesting that he was a charlatan, mentally ill, or possessed.

The hostility of his townspeople led Mohammed to dispatch some of his followers to safety in Ethiopia which was Christian. In 622, Mohammed relocated himself and his followers to the town of Yathrib several hundred miles north of Mecca. The city later came to be known as "The City of the Prophet" (*madinat al-nabi*), giving it its modern name, Medina. The relocation to Medina, known as the *Hijrah* ("migration") marks the beginning of the Muslim era, commonly abbreviated A.H. (Latin, *Anno Hegirae*). This is the main reason why years on the Muslim calendar are different from years on the Gregorian (Christian) calendar. Thus the Muslim year A.H. 1423 began in A.D. 2002.

After the relocation to Medina, Mohammed's followers grew substantially. They began to exert pressure on others in Arabia by conducting raids to attack and steal from trading caravans heading to and from Mecca. Some of these raids were led by Mohammed himself. In reprisal for these raids, the Meccans engaged Mohammed in a battle at Badr and were defeated. Mohammed interpreted this as divine vindication of his movement and used the political capital it generated to deal with his enemies in Medina—assassinating poets who satirized him and expelling one of three Jewish tribes in Medina. Later he expelled a second.

He was soon humiliated by the Meccans at another battle, Uhud, but when the Meccans attempted a protracted siege at Medina, their morale failed, and the Meccan forces faded away into the desert without substantially engaging the Muslims in combat. Following this, Mohammed consolidated his control over Medina, massacring the men of the third Jewish tribe of the city and selling its women and children into slavery.

He then began to exert even more pressure on Mecca, and, in 630, he and his forces seized control of Mecca virtually unopposed. Once there, they purged the Ka'bah of its idols so that it now became the central shrine of Islam and would henceforth be dedicated only to God.

Following Mohammed's seizure of Mecca, other Arab tribes submitted to him or were conquered. By his death of natural causes in 632, Mohammed was the undisputed master of the Arabian Peninsula.

## **What happened after the death of Mohammed?**

Following his death, Muslim forces began to direct outward the warlike energies that Arabs previously had spent on one another, and the result was a century of conquest. Mohammed's successors, the *khalifs* (caliphs), conducted an aggressive campaign of expansion. In this campaign, pagans were offered the choice of converting or dying, while Christians and Jews were offered the choices of converting, dying, or living in subjection as specially taxed, second-class citizens.

In less than a century, Muslims had seized control—among other lands—of Syria, Palestine, and North Africa. Though today we are used to thinking of these lands as Muslim, at the time they were Christian. It has been said that the expanding Muslim empire consumed half of Christian civilization. Even Europe itself was threatened. Muslims seized control of southern Spain, invaded France, and were threatening to invade Rome itself when their advance was stopped in 732 by Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours.

After their expansion in Western Europe had been checked for the moment, Muslims turned attention elsewhere. Within a further two centuries, they had conquered what is now Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and parts of India. They later advanced against Christian nations, conquering the Byzantine Empire in 1453 and encroaching as far as Vienna, Austria, in 1683.

## **Where do Muslims get their beliefs and practices?**

There are four principal sources for Islamic belief and practice:

1) Their holy book, the Qur'an (sometimes spelled *Koran* in English). It is held to be divinely inspired and completely inerrant. It is said to have been dictated to Mohammed from heaven so that its words bear no imprint of the human vessel through which it was delivered. Muslims hold that it is an exact copy of a book kept on a "preserved tablet" written in Arabic in heaven.

2) Tradition (Arabic, *sunnah*) regarding what Mohammed said or did. An individual item of tradition is known as a *hadith* (a report). The different traditions regarding Mohammed were put together in the ninth century into collections, also known as *hadith*. There are six major collections.

3) The consensus (Arabic, *ijma'*) of scholars. This is a set of standard interpretations of the Qur'an and the *hadith* that has existed since the eighth and ninth centuries.

4) The individual thought (Arabic, *ijtihad*) exerted in applying existing texts and principles to new problems and thus deriving new solutions over the course of time. Though acknowledged in principle, *ijtihad* has been neglected through much of Muslim history, resulting in cultural and intellectual stagnation.

## **What do Muslims believe?**

The basic Islamic profession of faith is, "There is no god but God, and Mohammed is his prophet." It is recited frequently in Muslim life.

Islam does not have a more detailed creed like the Apostles' Creed or Nicene Creed. Much less does it have an official catechism like the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.



Nevertheless, one passage in the Qur'an is often pointed to as a creed-like summary of the basic beliefs of Islam:

“Believe in Allah and his messenger, and the Scripture which he hath sent to his messenger and the Scripture which he sent to those before him. Any who denieth Allah, his angels, his books, his messengers, and the Day of Judgment, hath gone far, far astray.” (Q 4:136 *The Holy Quran*, tr. Yusuf Ali).

We can use the items mentioned in this text—God, his angels, his messengers, his Scripture, and the Last Day—as a basic outline of Muslim belief.

### **What do Muslims believe about God?**

A classic expression of Muslim belief about God is found in the 112th *surah* (chapter) of the Qur'an: “God is one, the eternal God. He begot none, nor was he begotten. None is equal to him.”

Muslims conceive of God as eternal and omnipotent, supremely just and supremely merciful. He is known by a host of names that express different aspects of his greatness (e.g., the First, the Last, the Maker, the Beneficent, the Merciful, the Compassionate, the Eternal). It is customary in Islam to use a set of prayer beads to recite the ninety-nine “most beautiful names” of God as a spiritual devotion (though there is no universally agreed upon list of these names).

The name that most Westerners are familiar with in connection with the Muslim view of God is *Allah*. The origin of the term is much debated. Some suggest that it was borrowed from another language in the family to which Arabic belongs, a group that includes Hebrew and Aramaic. Regardless of its precise derivation, *Allah* is the Arabic equivalent of the English word *God* (when used as a proper name). It was used before the time of Mohammed and continues to be used by Muslims and by Arabic-speaking Christians (such as Chaldean and Maronite Catholics) as their language's proper name for God.

Muslims believe that God is the Creator of the world and that there is only one God. Their belief in his unity is such that they reject the Christian idea of the Trinity. This is what is meant by the Qur'an's affirmation that “He begot none, nor was he begotten”—a rejection of the trinitarian affirmation that God the Father begot God the Son.

Correspondingly, Muslims do not recognize Jesus as God.

### **What do Muslims believe about God's angels?**

Islam's teachings about angels are not as clear as one might like, but it is definite in holding that angels exist. The Qur'an makes regular references to them. As in the Bible, angels are viewed as created beings (viewed in Islam as made of light) who serve as God's messengers and who perform various tasks for him.

Four chief angels are Gabriel, Michael, Israfil, and Izra'il. Gabriel is held to have revealed the Qur'an to Mohammed. Michael provides for the needs of people and particularly is the protector of the Jews. Israfil will blow the trumpet on the Last Day. And Izra'il (the “angel of death”) has care of the faithful when they die.

The relationship between the angels and another class of beings mentioned in the

Qur'an is not clear. These are the *jinn* (from which we get the English word *genie*). The *jinn* were created by God from fire, and there are both good *jinn* and bad *jinn*. There is much about the *jinn* in Muslim thought that is unclear. It is not always obvious that they are distinct from the angels, though usually they are. Some secularized Muslim scholars even deny that the *jinn* exist except as symbols, though many Muslims live in constant fear of being attacked by *jinn* working as evil spirits.

The evil class of *jinn* are also called *shaytans* (“satans”), and the head of them is the Devil, *Iblis* (from Greek, *diabolos*), who according to the Qur'an was cursed because he pridefully refused to pay homage to man when God created him (Q 15:32–35).

### **What do Muslims believe about God's messengers?**

Muslims hold that God has intervened in human history by sending spokesmen known as messengers and prophets. The distinction between the office of messenger (Arabic, *rasul*) and prophet (Arabic, *nabi*) is uncertain. The two terms often seem to be used interchangeably, though sometimes it is thought that messengers convey Scripture whereas prophets do not.

The number of messengers and prophets is not certain, but is large (Muslim tradition holds that there have been 124,000 prophets). Every people is said to have a messenger sent to it (Q 10:47, 16:36)—at least up until Mohammed's time. The Qur'an mentions numerous prophets. Some are figures from the Old and New Testaments, among them Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, John the Baptist, and Jesus. Some are otherwise unknown individuals (e.g., Hud, Salih, Shu'aib). The greatest of all the prophets, and also the last of them, is held to be Mohammed.

In the Muslim view, prophets are mortal men, though they are so holy that they either do not sin at all or do not have great sins. Their purpose is to reveal God's word to man and to call him to repentance, being mindful of the Last Day. According to Muslims, all of the prophets were Muslims, though their followers perverted their teachings, giving rise to various sects and religions. Only Mohammed's teachings have been kept pure by his followers.

### **What is the Muslim view of Jesus?**

Muslims believe that Jesus is not the Son of God but is a mere mortal. They do believe that he was born of a Virgin, and there even is Muslim devotion to his Mother, Mary. Muslims believe that Jesus was a great prophet, greater than all except Mohammed, but that is all. They further believe that Jesus, like all the prophets, was himself a Muslim and that his followers perverted the *injl* (gospel) given to him.

As a result, they do not believe in his saving death on the cross or in his Resurrection. They acknowledge that many people *perceived* him to be crucified, but it is agreed that he did not really die. It is commonly held that it was not he who was crucified at all but another individual (the identity of whom varies) who had been made by God to look like Jesus so that Jesus could escape.

Despite disbelief in Jesus' death and Resurrection, Muslims hold that he was caught up to God in heaven and that he will return in the end times. He will slay the Antichrist,

destroy all crosses, live on earth for a period, institute Islamic rule, have a family, and finally die and be buried near Mohammed in Medina.

### **What do Muslims believe about God's Scripture?**

Muslims believe that in the past God has given many scriptures to man but that most of these have been lost. Only four survive: the *Tawrat*, the *Zabur*, the *Injil*, and the *Qur'an*.

The *Tawrat* was given to Moses and is identified with the Torah, or Five Books of Moses (Genesis– Deuteronomy). The *Zabur* was given to David and is identified with the Psalms. The *Injil* was given to Jesus and is identified with the four Gospels (*injil* is an Arabic adaptation of the Greek word *euangelion* = “gospel,” just as *tawrat* is an adaptation of the Hebrew word *torah*).

The degree of identification between these three scriptures and the corresponding books of Christians and Jews is not clear and depends on the Muslim source one is consulting. Many ordinary Muslims simply identify these scriptures with the whole of the Old and New Testaments, but this is not the view of Muslim scholars, most of whom believe that Christians and Jews perverted not only the interpretation of their sacred books but the actual texts themselves. This is the only way that the many clear discrepancies between Judeo-Christian Scripture and the Qur'an could be explained, since the latter is held to be completely inerrant.

The Qur'an, as noted, is the Muslim holy book. It is a record of the dictations allegedly given to Mohammed by God through the angel Gabriel. It contains 114 chapters, known as *surahs*. These vary greatly in length, from only a sentence or two to units as long as the book of Genesis.

Mohammed did not write these down (indeed, Muslims report that he was illiterate). Instead, they were written down or memorized by others and then collected after his death. Oddly, the *surahs* were not put in any logical or chronological sequence. They were arranged by size, from the longest to the shortest (with some exceptions). Ironically, later scholars have concluded that the shorter *surahs* were the earliest and that the Qur'an is in better chronological order if one reads it backwards.

### **What do Muslims believe about the Last Day?**

Muslims, like Christians, do not believe that the world will go on forever but that there will be a Last Day. They also believe that there will be a number of signs that will precede the Last Day, including a lessening of morality, signs in the heavens, the appearance of an Antichrist, the resurrection of the dead, and the last judgment, followed by the consignment of all to their eternal destinies, either in heaven or hell.

### **How do Muslims practice their religion?**

Islam is practiced according to a detailed set of regulations that govern almost every aspect of a Muslim's life. These regulations belong to a body of law known as *shariah*, developed from the four principles of Islamic belief and practice discussed earlier (i.e., the Qur'an, *sunnah*, *ijma'*, and *ijtihad*). There are a number of established schools of *shariah*, which deals not only with the conduct of the individual Muslim but also with the

running of the Islamic state. *Shariah* was the law of the Islamic empire, but in the modern period it has been implemented only in part in most Muslim nations. Muslim fundamentalists wish to see a full revival and implementation of *shariah*.

At the core of Muslim religious practice are the “Five Pillars of Islam,” which are as follows:

1) **Confession of faith** (Arabic, *shahada*). This may be done by making the profession “There is no god but God, and Mohammed is his prophet.”

2) **Prayer** (Arabic, *salat*). Muslim prayer is ritual in nature. Five major times of prayer are required daily, and there are numerous minor prayers said as occasions arise.

3) **Fasting** (Arabic, *sawm*). Muslims are required to fast during the month of Rammadan. The fast is a complete one and is observed during daylight hours (as well as part of the night). Because Muslims use a lunar calendar that is shorter than the actual year by 11 days, the time of Rammadan and the other Muslim feasts rotate through the full course of the seasons every 33 years.

4) **Alms** (Arabic, *zaka*). Muslims are required to contribute a fortieth of their income to charitable purposes (e.g., to the poor, those in debt, travelers, for *jihad*).

5) **Pilgrimage** (Arabic, *hajj*). Once during their lifetimes, all Muslims who are physically and financially able to undertake a pilgrimage to Mecca are required to do so. The *hajj* is a complex, multi-day affair that involves visits to various sites in and around Mecca, animal sacrifice, and walking around the Ka’bah seven times. Part of the ceremony also involves kissing a black stone imbedded in the Ka’bah. The stone is revered as having been sent down from heaven (most commentators think that it is a meteorite).

Muslims are expected to practice all five of the pillars of Islam, and some add a sixth Pillar.

6) **Struggle** (Arabic, *jihad*). Muslims are taught that it is a duty to struggle for their faith and the good of their community. This struggle may be internal—a battle with personal sin—but often it has taken the form of armed violence. All are agreed that the use of arms to defend the Islamic community is a duty of all Muslims, but some argue that this duty should be reckoned as a pillar alongside the other five.

### **Are there different types of Muslims?**

There are several Muslim sects. The largest group is known as the Sunni, which consists of eighty to ninety percent of all Muslims.

Their major rival is the Shiites. These form a majority only in Iran, and they may be persecuted by Sunnis in other countries, where they are a minority. The Shiites have somewhat different beliefs and practices than the Sunni. They diverged soon after the time of Mohammed in a dispute over whom his successors were to be.

Basically, Shiite Muslims reject the first three of Mohammed’s successors, the *khalifs*, who are honored by the Sunni. According to the Shiites, the first legitimate successor of Mohammed was his son-in-law Ali, the husband of his daughter Fatima. Ali’s status as successor then was passed down through his family line. According to most Shiites, there were twelve successors (called *imams*). The line ended with the twelfth imam, a four-

year-old boy who vanished into a cave in 873. It is believed that he is still alive and that he will return on the Last Day to serve as the *madhi* (“rightly-guided one”) to establish Islamic rule in the world.

Both Sunni and Shiite Muslims have a number of offshoots, some of which are so extreme that they no longer are considered Muslims. Among the groups that have developed within or separated from Islam are the Ahmadhiyas, the Sikhs, the Druze, and the Baha’i. Of special note are the Wahhabis, a strict sect that arose in Saudi Arabia in the eighteenth century and that forms part of the background to the rise of Muslim fundamentalism in the late twentieth century.

## II. A Christian Appraisal of Islam

### **What is a Catholic to make of Islam?**

The Second Vatican Council noted that Muslims “adore the one God, living and subsisting in himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even his inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God.

“Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, his virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the Day of Judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving, and fasting” (*Nostra Aetate* 3).

A basic assessment of Islam is found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which states: “The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Muslims; these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind’s judge on the last day” (CCC 841).

### **Does this mean that Islam is a means of salvation for Muslims?**

No. What the Catechism says is that “the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator.” That is not the same thing as saying that they are saved by whatever religion they are in, whether it is Islam or Zoroastrianism or any other.

To fully appreciate this, one must look at the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* (LG), which the Catechism is quoting. LG 13 proclaims that “All men are called to be part of this Catholic unity of the people of God. . . . And there belong to or are related to it in various ways, the Catholic faithful, all who believe in Christ, and indeed the whole of mankind, for all men are called by the grace of God to salvation.”

All mankind is called to the “Catholic unity of the people of God”—i.e., to become Catholics. Some have done so, and so LG states that some “belong to” the Catholic Church while others “are related to it in various ways.” Those who belong to it are “the Catholic faithful,” while those who are related in various ways include “all who believe in Christ” (who are related to the Church in one way) and “the whole of mankind” (who are related to the Church in a different way).

LG 14 stresses the importance of becoming Catholic: “Basing itself upon sacred scripture and Tradition, [this Council] teaches that the Church, now sojourning on earth as an exile, is necessary for salvation. . . . Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse to enter or to remain in it, could not be saved.”

LG 16 turns to the case of non-Christians, stating, “Finally, those who have not yet received the gospel are related in various ways to the people of God.” Note that non-Christians are only “related in *various* ways” to the people of God and are not members themselves. Also note that they are spoken of as “those who have not yet received the

gospel”—implying that they *need* to receive the gospel.

It is only in this context that the text states, “But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place among whom are the Muslims.” The Council means that God *desires* their salvation and has made *plans* for their salvation, plans that include giving them graces that lead in the direction of salvation and the Church.

### **Is it possible for Muslims to be saved without becoming Christians?**

It is possible, though this is an exceptional case. The further away from the fullness of knowledge and the means of grace that are found in the Catholic Church, the harder it is for a person to be saved. Those who know that Jesus founded the Catholic Church as God’s means of conveying salvation to the world and who refuse to enter it cannot be saved. But if a person of any religion—Islam included—is innocently unaware of this fact and otherwise lives up to the degree of light and grace that God has given him, it is possible for him to be saved.

This does not mean that he is saved *by* whatever religion he is in. This is forcefully underlined in the document *Dominus Jesus* (2000) that was released by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. “[I]t would be contrary to the faith to consider the Church as one way of salvation alongside those constituted by the other religions, seen as complementary to the Church or substantially equivalent to her” (DJ 21). “If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that objectively speaking they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation” (DJ 22).

There should be no doubt that, while the Church recognizes that the followers of Islam do have elements of truth and while it is possible for them—as for all men—to be saved if they live up to the light God has given them, it cannot be said that Islam is a path of salvation or that Muslims do not need to become Christians.

### **The Catechism said that Muslims “profess to hold the faith of Abraham.” What does that mean?**

The operative word here is *profess*— they *claim* to hold the faith of Abraham, whom they acknowledge as a prophet and patriarch (indeed, the Arabs are regarded as descendents of Abraham’s son Ishmael). In reality, the Muslim faith is an imperfect version of the faith that comes from Abraham, but Muslims are trying to follow in the footsteps of Abraham, and the Catechism gives them credit for that.

### **The Catechism says of Muslims: “Together with us they adore the one, merciful God.” How can that be when they do not accept the doctrine of the Trinity?**

God does not require one to know a certain amount about him before one can talk to him or tell him how great he is. He is aware of and acknowledges all that is good and true in the worship offered to him, however imperfect an understanding of him a worshiper may have.

While Muslims, like Jews, do not accept the Trinity, they do acknowledge that God is the only true God, that he is merciful, and that he will judge all mankind on the Last Day.

This means they honor things that are true about God but have a limited understanding of him. Christians have a fuller understanding of God because he has revealed more to us about himself: specifically, that he is a Trinity. This doctrine cannot be deduced by human reason; it can be known only by revelation (CCC 237).

Jews worshiped God before the doctrine of the Trinity was revealed, and mere failure to accept this revelation of the Christian age does not stop them today from worshiping God, albeit imperfectly. The Church always has acknowledged that Jews worship God, even if it is not with the fullness of Catholic truth that God desires.

In the same way, failure to accept the revelation that God is a Trinity does not stop Muslims from worshiping God. It means that they know less about God and that they have erroneous corollary ideas, but it does not mean that they are unable to direct their prayers to God as Creator or that they cannot be awed by how he has made the world and by the providential care he has for mankind.

### **How does the Muslim view of God compare with the Christian view?**

Both the Bible and the Qur'an ascribe marvelous attributes to God, among them perfect justice and perfect mercy. It is a mistake to portray, as some do, the Muslim view of God as a harsh deity devoid of mercy and compassion. Indeed, one of the most frequent names given to God in the Qur'an is *ar-Rahman*, "the Merciful."

Nevertheless, there is a difference. Islam holds that God is transcendent in a way that precludes the kind of intimacy he shows with mankind in the Bible. Though Islam acknowledges the closeness of God to man in one sense, saying that God is closer to a man than his own jugular vein (Q 50:16), it nevertheless denies God the fatherly intimacy with man that he reveals himself to have in the New Testament.

In *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Pope John Paul II wrote: "Some of the most beautiful names in the human language are given to the God of the Qur'an, but he is ultimately a God outside of the world, a God who is *only Majesty, never Emmanuel, God-with-us. Islam is not a religion of redemption.* There is no room for the cross and the Resurrection. Jesus is mentioned, but only as a prophet who prepares for the last prophet, Mohammed. There is also mention of Mary, his Virgin Mother, but the tragedy of redemption is completely absent. For this reason not only the theology [doctrine of God] but also the anthropology [doctrine of man] of Islam is very distant from Christianity" (CTH 92–93).

### **How does the Qur'an compare with the Bible?**

Although Muslims extol the Qur'an as a literary masterpiece, and although they piously assert that it reads much more beautifully in Arabic than in translation, it is difficult for those who have a familiarity with the Bible not to notice the great difference between the two works.

Though there are individual passages in the Qur'an that have vivid poetic imagery and forceful language, the work lacks the literary artistry found in the Bible. However much Arabs praise it, the Qur'an reads like what it is: the dictations of an illiterate Arab that, after his death, were jumbled together without a coherent order. It is a thoroughly



frustrating read, with countless repetitions of the same stories and threats.

Nineteenth-century Scottish lecturer Thomas Carlyle commented upon the Qur'an: "I must say, it is as toilsome reading as I ever undertook. A wearisome confused jumble, crude, incondite; endless iterations, long-windedness, entanglement. . . . Nothing but a sense of duty could carry any European through the Qur'an" (*Heroes and Hero Worship*, lecture 2).

In a similar vein, though more concerned with matters of substance than style, Pope John Paul II remarked: "Whoever knows the Old and New Testaments, and then reads the Qur'an, clearly sees the *process by which it completely reduces Divine Revelation*. It is impossible not to note the movement away from what God said about himself, first in the Old Testament through the prophets, and then finally in the New Testament through his Son. In Islam all the richness of God's self-revelation, which constitutes the heritage of the Old and New Testaments, definitively has been set aside" (CTH 92; emphasis in original).

In view of the radical disagreements between the contents of the Qur'an and the Old and New Testaments, Christians cannot honor the Qur'an as Scripture or as authentic prophecy.

### **Is Islam a religion of violence?**

Characterizing a religion as being "of violence" or "of peace" is simplistic. As Solomon pointed out, "For everything there is a season; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time for war, and a time for peace" (Eccles. 3:1, 3, 8). That is the way life works in a fallen world, and every religion capable of serving as the basis of a culture has recognized both the need for peace and the need for the use of violence in certain circumstances.

Religions that are totally pacifistic have to rely on the good graces of others who are willing to use violence to protect them; and religions that are totally devoted to violence do not survive long since they either kill themselves off or are broken up by their neighbors as a matter of self-protection. For a religion to serve as the basis of a culture, it must seek to preserve peace in substantial measure but also be willing to use force. Thus, all of the major world religions tend toward this mean.

This is not to say that some religions are not more encouraging of violence or peace than others. In this regard, Islam has the greatest violence potential of the three major Western religions.

This may be seen by considering the natures and the founders of the three religions.

Though belief in the true God goes back to the dawn of mankind, Judaism in its traditional form was founded by Moses, who if evaluated politically could be considered a warlord, leading the tribes of Israel toward the Promised Land and the conquest that would follow. The Old Testament contains numerous commands to use violence to protect and promote the nation of Israel. This potential for violence is reigned in by the fact that Judaism is a religion for only one ethnic group confined to one territory.

Christianity, by contrast, is a pan-ethnic religion, meant for all peoples in all countries. It has much greater reach, but much lower intrinsic potential for violence. Its founder—Christ—was a martyr, who refused to fight to save his life. Though the New Testament

acknowledges that the Old Testament revelation is from God, it does not contain new commands to use violence, as Christianity was not to be allied from its birth to a state in the way that Judaism was.

Islam's founder was a warlord, who rose from obscurity and who, in his lifetime, conquered the Arabian Peninsula. The holy book he produced is filled with commands to use violence in the service of its religion and nation. This potential for violence is similar to that possessed by Judaism except it is immensely augmented by the fact that Islam views itself, like Christianity, as a pan-ethnic religion meant for all peoples in all countries. It therefore has been willing to employ violence on a massive scale, as illustrated by the first century of its existence, when the Islamic empire conquered much of the known world.

The attitude of Islam toward using violence against non-Muslims is quite clear. Regarding pagans, the Qur'an says: "Slay the idolaters wherever you find them. Arrest them, besiege them, and lie in ambush everywhere for them. If they repent and take to prayer and render the alms levy, allow them to go their way. God is forgiving and merciful" (Q 9:5). This amounts to giving polytheists a convert-or-die choice.

Regarding violence against Jews and Christians, the Qur'an says: "Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and his messenger [Mohammed], nor acknowledge the religion of truth, from among the people of the Book [the Bible], until they pay the *jizyah* [tribute] with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued" (Q 9:29; Ali translation). In other words, violence is to be used against Jews and Christians unless they are willing to pay a special tax and live in subjection to Muslims as second-class citizens. For them the choice is convert, die, or live in subjection.

It must be pointed out that there are people of peace and people of violence in all religions. There are violent Christians. There are peace-loving Muslims. Changing historical circumstances do much to bring out tendencies toward violence and peace among the followers of different religions. Even when these qualifications are made, it is clear that Islam has the greatest tendency to violence of the three major Western religions.

### **After September 11, 2001, some Muslims claimed that Islam is a religion of peace and that even its name means "peace." Is that true?**

Some making this claim pointed out that the word *islam* is based on the same root (*s-l-m*) that is behind the Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*. While Arabic and Hebrew are related languages, not everything based on the *s-l-m* root means "peace." Indeed, the normal Arabic word for peace is *salaam*, not *islam*.

More conventionally translated, *islam* means "submission." To the extent that it signifies peace, it indicates the peace that exists when one party is in submission to another, not the peace that exists between friendly equals. Further, the *islam* that the religion is named after is not peace between man and man but between man and God—divine peace through submission to God, not peace among men.

The portrayal of Islam as a religion of peace based upon its name thus falls into the

category of “useful fiction” or “half truth.” It does nothing to ameliorate the violence actually committed by radical Muslims.

**Does the Church want peaceful relations with the Islamic world?**

To the extent possible, yes. While recognizing that there are situations in which force has to be used by nations in self-defense (CCC 2308–2310), the Church desires a more peaceful state of affairs between Christians and Muslims.

The Second Vatican Council stated: “Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom” (*Nostra Aetate* 3).

Unfortunately, the road to that state is likely to be a long one that is fraught with difficulty. Many Muslim countries not only have the problem of militant Muslim movements and terrorists, they generally have a poor record of respecting the rights and religious liberty of non-Muslims within their borders.

Pope John Paul II noted that “concrete difficulties are not lacking. In countries where *fundamentalist movements* come to power, human rights and the principle of religious freedom are unfortunately interpreted in a very one-sided way—religious freedom comes to mean freedom to impose on all citizens the ‘true religion.’ In these countries the situation of Christians is sometimes terribly disturbing. Fundamentalist attitudes of this nature make reciprocal contacts very difficult. All the same, the Church always remains open to dialogue and cooperation” (CTH 94; emphasis in original).

### III. Sharing the Gospel With Muslims

#### **How can I share the gospel with my Muslim friends?**

The basic method is the same as sharing the gospel with any of your friends. The content of the gospel is the same for everyone: “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).

Tell your Muslim friends that God loves them and that, as a result, he sent his Son, Jesus, to make atonement for their sins so that they could spend eternity with God in heaven.

Love is a keynote of Christianity that Islam lacks. In the words of one Muslim convert to Christianity, “Christianity is a religion of love, but Islam is a religion of fear.” Muslims do not have the kind of loving, intimate relationship with God that Christians do. Show that to them, talk about it, about how much you love God and want them to share in the feeling of God’s love, and that will help show them the light of the gospel.

#### **Does this mean one should not discuss religious matters with Muslims?**

No, of course not. Sharing the gospel with Muslims will give rise to questions on their part, and you need to do all you can to answer their questions.

One of the first things that you will need to do is warn the Muslim not to judge Christianity by what he has been told. Many Muslims have heard erroneous stories about Christianity, some of which go back centuries. The Christians that Mohammed was in contact with tended not to be orthodox representatives of the Christian faith, but heretics. As a result, Muslims should know that their books frequently are not responding to authentic Christianity but to a counterfeit. Tell your friend that you will show him what actual Christian teaching is, then document what you say from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* or other key reference works.

Most importantly, answering a Muslim’s questions must be done in the spirit of love, even if the questions are sometimes sharp or probing. In evangelization, we must always be “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15).

#### **What kind of objections will Muslims make to the Christian faith?**

It depends on the particular Muslim that one is talking to, of course, but there are certain general kinds of objections that are likely to be made.

Many times Muslims will try to argue that the Bible contains contradictions, whereas the Qur’an is pure. The doctrine of the Trinity is a frequent object of Muslim criticism. In particular, they will argue that Jesus could not be the Son of God. They also frequently will argue that Jesus did not die on the Cross. For resources dealing with these sort of objections, see *Answering Islam* by Norman Geisler and Abdul Saleeb and *The Bible and the Qur’an* by Jacques Jomier, among other works.

In addition to objections that go to the foundations of the Christian faith (the Trinity, Jesus, the Bible), Muslims also are likely to have criticisms of Christianity based on history. For example, many Muslims have been taught that Christians are aggressors, as

illustrated by the Crusades. If a Muslim asks you about such events, help him see the historical context in which they occurred. Point out that at the time of the Crusades Muslims had conquered half of the Christian world and had begun to interfere with Christians going on pilgrimages to the Holy Land.

Ask him: If Christians had conquered half of Muslim territory, including Mecca, and had begun to interfere with Muslims going on the *Hajj*, would you expect Muslims to try to defend their faith and take back territory that had been seized? If so, then try to understand what the Crusaders were seeking to do. It was not aggression for the sake of aggression. The Crusades were a set of defensive wars trying to retake what had been conquered, particularly the holy sites.

**A Muslim I am talking with has been coming to me with a lot of alleged Bible contradictions. What should I do?**

This is a favorite tactic of Muslim apologists. Your friend may have encountered such an apologist who has provided him with a litany of alleged Bible contradictions. To help him keep growing in faith, you should help him work through these to see that they do not, in fact, involve actual contradictions.

There are books that can help you do that, among them are Gleason Archer's *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* and John Haley's *Alleged Discrepancies in the Bible*. (Note: Neither of those authors is Catholic, but their books are still useful.)

As you work through these with the Muslim, point out that Christians have been aware of the alleged contradictions for a long time and that the ways of reconciling them are well worked out. Usually, in order to generate a contradiction, the Muslim apologist is forced to take a Bible passage with only one narrow interpretation, where in fact it can be taken in several senses due to the flexibility of language. Once it is recognized just how flexible language is, the contradictions vanish.

Unfortunately, some Christian apologists try to turn the tables on Muslim apologists by alleging all kinds of contradictions in the Qur'an, without giving Muslims the same kind of flexibility in resolving them that Christians use in resolving alleged Bible difficulties. That is not fair, and a Muslim concerned with Bible difficulties will spot this.

**I am sharing the gospel with a Muslim friend who is being talked to by some Evangelicals. Now he is not sure whether he should be Catholic or Protestant. What should I do?**

This is a common situation in this country since there are so many Protestants here. Fortunately, the solution is simple: Tell your Muslim friend that he should follow the truth as he sees it. If he thinks that Protestantism is true, then he should become a Protestant. If he thinks that Catholicism is true then he should become a Catholic.

Tell him that you yourself are convinced that the Catholic Church is true, that it is the Church Jesus founded, and that *if he wishes* you will be happy to share with him the evidence for this.

Taking this approach not only corresponds with proper evangelism and faith in God, it also is likely to be more attractive to your friend than what his Evangelical friends are

doing, for many of them *will* try to put pressure on him to become Evangelical, and he will not appreciate that.

There are also other things that you may find attract your friend to Catholicism. For one, Islam recognizes the human need for ritual and has ritual prayers in addition to spontaneous ones. Catholicism recognizes that, too, but Protestantism tends not to. As a result, many Muslims becoming Christian are attracted to Catholicism because it has a strong sense of ritual prayer that corresponds to the need of the human heart for ritual.

Catholicism recognizes that people in other religions may be in good conscience with respect to God, who will honor that fact. As a result, it acknowledges that a convert's still-Muslim relatives may be saved even if they do not become Christians.

Many Evangelicals do not recognize this fact and will tell converts from Islam that all of their Muslim friends and loved ones will be damned unless they convert.

This is hard to accept for many converts from Islam, who recognize many of their loved ones as sincere, pious people who are trying to follow God according to what they think is right. The converts' hearts tell them that it would be unjust for God to damn such people. Catholicism, by recognizing God's mercy on all who sincerely try to follow him, corresponds to the intuition of the converts' hearts, where the teaching of Protestant Evangelicalism does not.

There are even points of doctrinal contact between Islam and Catholicism that do not exist between it and Protestantism. For example, Muslims recognize that even those who try to follow God with a pure heart frequently are not totally pure and need to be purified after this life. As a result, they acknowledge a form of purgatory—a purification of the faithful after death and before heaven. They may not call it *purgatory* in Islam, but they recognize it as a familiar concept when they encounter it in a Catholic context.

**I have a Muslim friend who says he believes that Christianity is true but is having trouble with summoning the courage to become a Christian. He says he still has trouble with certain doctrines, such as the deity of Christ. What should I do?**

Making the transition from Islam to Christianity is a big jump, and it takes time for many to gain the confidence to do it. This is to be expected. The fact that your friend is taking his time is itself a good sign. Jesus warned us that people who convert too quickly tend to fall away quickly (Luke 8:13). The hesitancy your friend expresses shows that he is serious, that he wants to do the right thing and is not going to rush into something without thinking. That is good and praiseworthy.

It is understandable that certain Christian doctrines take awhile to get used to, even after one is convinced of the basic truth of Christianity. That is often how it is with converts, from whatever faith. Even after one has grasped the fact that God loves us so much that he chose to be born as one of us, the idea that he chose to be born as Jesus in particular is something that strikes Muslims as odd. They have known about Jesus all their lives yet regarded him as a human prophet, as we Christians regard Moses.

In the same way, it takes awhile for Muslims to get used to the idea that someone they have always regarded as only a human was, in fact, God incarnate. To help them with this, be patient with them, give them the time they need to get used to the concept, and

perhaps show them a list of verses in the New Testament that show Jesus to be God.

**I spend a good bit of time on the Internet, and I have run into a Muslim who wants to know more about Christianity. What should I do?**

To the extent the Internet allows, apply the same rules of friendship evangelization. Answer his questions and point him to Internet sites where he can learn more about the faith (e.g., [www.catholic.com](http://www.catholic.com)).

Be aware that your friend must be careful if he is in a Muslim country. Converting from Islam is probably illegal where he is, and he could be thrown in jail or even executed if he is found out. Help him learn how to research Christianity as safely as possible from where he is. Unless he works in a computer field, he may not be as computer-savvy as you are and could be vulnerable. Help him find ways to make his inquiries into Christianity more secure.

If he is writing from work or from a computer that other people use, tell him not to leave Christian files on the computer where they could be found. Help him learn to clear his web browser's cache and link history. Remind him about the need to empty his computer's recycle bin. It may be safer for him if he sets up a web-based e-mail account rather than using one that retrieves the mail so that it can be read offline. If your normal chat or e-mail account has Christian words in it, it may be safer for him if you set up a new account to use when communicating with him.

**There is a Muslim I work with whom I want to share the gospel with, but I am not sure how to start. What should I do?**

Get a sense for whether he would be receptive. If you think that he would be, take whatever expressions of openness he shows toward Christianity and use them as a starting point.

If he asks questions about the Christian faith, answer them and offer him more information, perhaps giving him a *simple* book or article to help him learn more.

Ask him to dinner. Just be sure that you serve things that he can eat and drink. Muslims are not allowed to eat pork or drink alcoholic beverages; do *not* offer these to him unless he has expressed interest in trying them.

As you spend time with him, do not hide your faith. As things come up that you normally would comment on from a faith perspective, comment on them in front of him. Do not be pushy; just be yourself, and as he sees Christ working in your life, he will become curious.

Be sensitive to his needs. One thing that many Muslims worry about, especially in a post-September 11 environment, is that Christians are being nice to them because they are afraid of them. Make sure that your friend understands that you are being nice to him not because you fear him but because Jesus loves him and wants him to know that love.

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