

# Christ Presbyterian Church

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**"Glad You Asked - Christianity and Islam: 'Are We Talking to the Same God?'"**

**Genesis 16:1,16; 21:1,8-21**

We've had over 175 questions submitted for the summer series and we've picked the 12 most requested topics. In the theological category, by far the biggest topic was the idea of other world religions. Are all the other religions of the world wrong? How do we deal with Muslims who don't believe that we believe in God? And, is their God our God? This morning I'd like to begin to talk about that with you. Let's start with God's Word.

The story of Genesis talks about the beginning of three of the great religions of the world. In Genesis 16 it says, "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian servant named Hagar; so she said to Abram, 'The Lord has kept me barren. Go, sleep with her; perhaps I can build a family through her.'" So Abram slept with Hagar but "when she knew she was pregnant, Hagar began to despise her mistress." So Sarai mistreated Hagar, the servant, and Hagar fled into the desert.

"The angel of the Lord found Hagar....and said, 'Go back to your mistress and submit to her.' The angel added, 'I will increase your descendants to so much that they will be too numerous to count.'" "You shall name the boy Ishmael....for he will live in enmity with others'....Hagar said, 'You are the God who sees me....'"

So 15 years go by. No baby for Sarah. She is 90 years old now. Abraham is 100. Young Ishmael is 14. In Genesis 21 it says, by God's promises Sarah conceived and gave birth to Isaac. "But when Sarah saw Hagar's son mocking them," like a 14-year-old will, "she said to Abraham, 'Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.' The matter distressed Abraham greatly...but God said to him, 'Do not be so distressed about the boy and your servant. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. I will make the son of the servant into a nation also, because he is your offspring.'"

So Abraham sent them into the wilderness where God rescued them and later Ishmael married an Egyptian for a wife. The end of that particular part of the story doesn't come for another 75 years. But I'd like to start by asking you, just for a minute, when I say the word *Islam*, what images pop into your mind? Anybody? "Terrorism." What else? "Women wearing hoods." What else? "Prayer." "Prayer rugs." What else? "Mosques." "The *Hajj*" when people go to Mecca. "Great devotion." I am sure we could come up with others. "A whole different way of life." "Mistreatment of women." "Isolation." Some of the ones that I came up with, the minarets, the

call to worship, the prayer, the men bowing their face to Mecca. We think of Islam primarily as Arabs though there are more Muslims in the country of Indonesia than the entire Arabian Peninsula. We think of women in burkhas and chadors though, again, that is primarily on the Arabian Peninsula. If we are honest, when we think of Islam, we think of the smoking ruins of the Twin Towers. Again, that is like saying *Christian* and then putting up a picture of Slobodan Milosevic.

We think of Islam and we get tense because it's about *them*. Even as the first congressman from Minnesota took his oath on the Koran—I saw many videos as I was doing the research for this sermon that were fear-mongering videos, both ways, about a campaign of Israeli lies against Muslims and about the Muslim population bomb overwhelming us all. We would have to recognize that this is a hard time to get along with the Muslim community. Protests at building a mosque right near where the Twin Towers fell. Islam being called an evil religion by televangelists. The Swiss government saying, “No, you may not build any more minarets. They are disruptive.” The French banning the public wearing of burkhas and chadors. The cancelation of our mission trip. One of our prayers this weekend was supposed to be for our high school students who were to go to Uganda, but the mission trip had to be canceled because of a suicide bombing. This is not a theoretical clash for many followers of Jesus. In the majority world, especially in Africa and Asia, this is a conflict of religions that is visceral and not just on paper.

I was at a dinner in the eastern side of the Congo in Goma and had a fierce, loud argument with a man who knew Islam much differently than I did because he had been born a Muslim, had converted to Christianity, and was sure that the way the West saw Islam was completely wrong. So I'd like to have us talk about Islam and Christianity, Mohammed and Jesus. This is the start of the conversation and let me start, as a disclaimer, that I am from the outside trying to paint another religion. I have had help from Rich Mouw, Al Mohler, Andy Stanley, and Timothy George. This fall I will continue a conversation I have had with Sheik Odeh Muhawesh from the University of St. Thomas. I will talk about Islam, about the relationship of Christianity and Islam, and then answer your questions.

**Islam.** In about the year 570 A.D. a young Arab was born. Early on he was orphaned. One of his names becomes Mohammed and by the time he is 40 he has become a profitable businessman. Around the age 40 in a cave outside Medina, he begins to have a series of visions where he sees the angel Gabriel talking to him with the voice of God. After a short time, Mohammed takes those visions and says them out loud to his wife and his cousin and they write them down because Mohammed could not write.

After a couple of years Mohammed begins to share his visions and develops a big following, especially in Medina because he is saying that God is *one*. The Arabian Peninsula is filled with polytheists, many gods. He is saying, “One God, and this God is a God of justice” which, primarily to the people that he was talking about, meant that the rich were robbing the poor. The poor flocked to this message of one God and justice, so much so that after several years of teaching, Mohammed had to flee from Medina to Mecca and only returned ten years later.

Mohammed did not feel that he was starting a new religion. He had been in contact with some Jews early on, the one God, but he felt like he was a mouthpiece for that one God to the Arabs, the same way that Jesus was to the Jews, and that the Jews were to the Middle East. He saw

no conflict early on between Islam and Christianity or the Jews. The only ones who really needed to be converted were the ones who didn't believe in one God—the pagans.

He returns to Mecca triumphantly but dies shortly after his return. Yet within a hundred years of his death, Islam has spread all through the Persian Empire, all around the top layer of Africa, is heading into Spain, and is only stopped at the Pyrenees from taking over Europe by several bloody battles. Like Christianity—listen to this sentence—like Christianity Islam is the other great proselytizing religion. Muslims and Christians both want you to think about their God the way that *they* think about their God whereas other religions or other philosophical systems are much more *laissez faire*. You believe your thing; I believe my thing. Muslims and Christians say, “No, no, it is important that you believe in the one God, my God.” So much of the growth of Islam has been spread by conquest or state sanction, much the way that early Christianity was spread by conquest and sanction. It was spread by persuasion and education but, primarily, it was spread through example, people watching the devotion to one God change others' lives.

In modern days, the primary way that Islam has spread is through birth rate. Europe may very well become a Muslim continent because the birth rate of Muslims is so much higher than that of European natives. Europe could be 50 percent Muslim in our lifetime, right now probably 5 to 7 million United States Muslims, 1.4-plus billion Muslims around the world. That's the quick picture.

**What do Muslims believe?** Well, like Christians, Muslims believe a lot of different things but common beliefs would be these: the core of Islam is what I would call radical monotheism; there is but one God; anything else is anathema. In the early days, that one God meant that Mohammed, like the apostle Paul, would be distressed at all the different gods. The Iranian Peninsula was filled with household gods and national gods. Paul says, “There is only one God.” Back then. Today, Muslims say there is only one God. There is not Father God, Son God, and Spirit God. There is one God, and like the Jews, they resist to their core, the Trinity.

The second, Islam is a religion of *last day*. It's a religion of judgment. Islam believes we will be judged on what we believe and what we do, which is common to Christianity. The Koran is the holy book of the Muslim. We believe that the Bible is God's Word interpreted and written down through the personalities of people. Muslims believe the Koran is, literally, dictated. We say, “The Word became Flesh.” Muslims would say, “The Word became book.”

The Koran is filled with things that are either intentioned internally or flatly contradictory statements, in other words, contradictory statements. Muslims are fine with that because they believe in what is called *progressive revelation*, you learn more as time goes on. Mohammed's visions became clearer and clearer and the later visions supersede the earlier visions even though they don't throw them out. The problem for those who are not raised with the Koran is that the Koran is not written chronologically, earlier to latest, but is instead written by the length of the poem. It is much more like reading the Book of Proverbs than the rest of the Bible, where sayings are lumped right next to each other. They are ordered by their length, the length of the poems and surahs or chapters.

The last thing I'd say about Islam is that its core belief is a faith of obedience and culture more than a faith of theology. Let me say that again. It's more about obedience than theology. There are fine theologians in the Muslim world but most Muslims it's more about obedience and culture than it is about abstract theology. I've got to tell you, that sounds familiar to me. Growing up

Catholic, it was much more about obedience and culture than it was about abstract Biblical theology. Some of you may have had the same experience growing up, that it was a cultural thing as much as it was about abstract theology.

When you think of Islam, you think about the only thing many of us know, the Five Pillars, right? The Five Pillars, how to obey and, therefore, please Allah. *Allah* is just the Arab word for God. There is no God but Allah. There is no God but God. These are the Five Pillars:

First, the Iman, **the declaration of faith**. There is no God but God and Muhammad is His prophet. Second pillar, you **obey God by praying daily**, five specified times facing Mecca, although originally it was not facing Mecca, it was facing Jerusalem. The third of the pillars is **welfare**. Hospitality is at the core of Muslim culture, bringing in the uninvited stranger. The children of Ishmael know what it is like to be thrown out and they are wonderful hosts when they choose to be, and the care for the poor is involved in that welfare, the third pillar. The fourth pillar is that **during the month of Ramadan, each year you will fast between sunrise and sunset**. It is a time of purification, a clearing of the mind, a sign of devotion. Then finally, somebody had mentioned the *Hajj* earlier, which is the fifth pillar of the Islamic faith. This is the **pilgrimage that one would take to Mecca if one is able at least once in their life**.

Most Muslims are divided into two categories, the *Sunnis* and the *Shia*. The *Sunnis* are by far the more populous around the world. We tend to think mostly about the *Shia* because they are dominant in some of the nations of the Arabian Peninsula with whom we are having international conflict.

In Christianity, you will remember, after about a thousand years, there was a split between and Eastern Church that wanted it located in Alexandria and the Western Church that wanted to have it located in Rome. They split. After another several years, the Western Church splits between Rome and the Reformers. Early on Islam splits over who the true leaders are after Mohammed dies? "His biological descendants," said the *Shiites*. "No, no, the teachers that Mohammed trusted the most," said the *Sunnis*. That is what continues to this day.

**How do we get along and is this the same God?** Let me make just three points on the *how do we get along* part. We need to realize that most violence between Muslims and Christians is not religious; it is political. Muslims are not killing Christians because they are heathen, unbelievers. They are killing them because they perceive them to be on their land or unjust or oppressing them or supporting Israel—a political thing. Some of the confusion in that first point—that it's political, not religious—is that Islam does not have the differentiation that the between *church* and *state* like the West does. We separate those two out. In Islam theocracy, where God would rule the people, it is a much more natural concept so there is not a difference between what Muslims believe and how their government acts. That is why their language often appears so much more religious. But, an IRA bomber or an Afrikaner who would justify what they did by *faith*, is not really religious; it is political.

Second, I would point to the idea that Islam is about 1,400 years old. It has been an oppositional religion much of that time—that is, people have been opposed to it much of that time. When Christendom was 1,400 years old, what was just ending? The Crusades, five, six, seven Crusades. Pope Urban says, "This is God's will that you kill the heathen on your way back to the Promised Land." Then following that killing in the Name of Jesus comes the Inquisition and all of

its horrors. I am not at all excusing Muslim extremism or violence. I am just trying to do some *compare and contrast*.

The third thing I would say is that I don't think you judge the core of any faith—Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism—you cannot judge the core of the faith by the edges of the faith. You cannot judge the bulk of the people by the fanatics *in* the people. It would be like saying that the representatives of Christianity are IRA bombers or Dutch extremists who say that black people are second class and that is why apartheid exists.

I would say that here is a place where we have been done a great disservice by our media because I believe in this struggle, what bleeds leads. We often hear, "Where are the Muslims who stand up against terrorism?" There are hundreds of Muslim scholars and authorities who have issued *fatwas*, that is, authoritative teachings against terrorism but they are set aside as soon as one new person walks into a café and blows himself up. I believe that much of the Muslim hatred of the West is very real but rooted in poverty and ignorance, looking for an enemy, and in the ignoring of Islam's own teaching, just like people in Northern Ireland, just like people in Kosovo ignore the teachings of Jesus. Listen to the Koran: "Do not argue with followers of early revelation other than in a most kindly manner. For we believe in that which has been bestowed on us all as well as that which has been bestowed on you for our God is one and the same, and we all surrender to Allah."

That's probably a good transition to that last question, **is Allah the God of the Bible?** Do we worship the same God? Well, for the Muslim, the answer is, "Yes, we do." There can be only one God. Yes, that is the God of the Bible. Muslims see Islam as a corrective to Christianity. Judaism, they say, is the foundation upon which Islam is built and corrects. Mohammed originally had his followers kneel and face Jerusalem where the father, Abraham, was promised the land.

Two major differences between Muslims and Christians are, first, the Islamic radical monotheism makes them say *no* to the Trinity, no Father, Son, Spirit, and *no* to the Divinity of Jesus. Jesus was not God, they say. Jesus was a prophet that they honor. Muslims believe that the apostle Paul had to depart from Jesus' teaching in the key Jewish teaching in order to get otherwise resistant Pagans outside of Palestine to follow Jesus and his success paved the way for more profound changes to the Christian message later on. First thing is, one God vs. Jesus as Divine and the Trinity. Second, a great stumbling block, is that in the end, the center of the Christian message is that we are sinners saved by grace. Muslims say that we are children of Allah, who must obey and that sin that cannot be overcome is not believed in, and grace is not sufficient. It is about earning your salvation. It is about obeying your way through following Allah.

So, is the Father of Jesus the God of Mohammed? Timothy George is the dean of the Beeson Divinity School of Stamford University. He said this, which I agree with, "I affirm that Judaism, Islam, and Christianity are children of Abraham and then I draw the line at whom Jesus Christ is. Telling someone that they worship a false god simply cuts the conversation off right at the start, but witnessing whom Jesus Christ is as a Savior and not a mere prophet keeps the conversation going because most Muslims have a favorable view of Jesus." That builds on what Bishop Stephen Neill says, that devout Muslims have not rejected Jesus. They simply have never seen Jesus as He is really presented in the Bible. They want to honor Jesus as a prophet but their view of Him is obscured by a "veil of prejudice and misunderstanding." Muslims insist that a real Son of God, which is a contradiction in terms for them, but a real Son of God would not fail or be killed.

Could I just add to that that the Christian Church has not helped Muslims understand who Jesus really is, either by the way we talk about Jesus or by the way we live in following Jesus. "If you are going to hate me, I am going to hate you right back." So I guess I would say, do we really believe what we say we really believe? My founder says, "You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy,' but I say to you, 'Love your enemy and do good to those who hate you. If they strike you on one cheek, turn the other also.'" If followers of Mohammad saw followers of Jesus acting like that...

I said that I would share with you the rest of the story of Abraham and Sarah, Hagar and Isaac and Ishmael. It ends in 75 years later in Genesis 25. "Altogether," it says, "Abraham lived 175 years and then he breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years....and his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah," about 30 miles south of where Jerusalem is today. The sons met at the death of their father. Please, to the God of Abraham, that we could meet before it's at the grave.

Lord Jesus, when we talk to You, we talk to God. When we trust You, we trust the Father. I pray that You will give us clarity and that You will give us grace. I pray that You will help us to hold fast to Your Word in Scripture and to be humble about what we do not know. I pray that You will teach us, that You came filled with grace and truth, and that in faith and hope and love, we might realize that what changes the world most is Your love. In Your great and holy Name, we pray. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*