

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 40

Muhammad and Islam – Part 2

Last week we studied the historical background of Muhammad and the arising of Islam. This week we study the core teachings of Islam, comparing them to those of Orthodox Christianity. This comparison is by no means complete and exhaustive; rather, keeping with the spirit of Church History Literacy, it is an overview. Readers are urged to look at the footnoted source material should they wish for additional reading materials and information. We should add a note about the source material used in these lessons. There are a number of books written about the beliefs of Islam, the beliefs of Christianity, and even the comparison of the two. We have not used any one source, but as much as possible have tried to use the Koran and Bible themselves to substantiate the teachings of this class. Where we have used analysis of others, we have not used Christian material to determine the beliefs of Muslims. Neither have we used Muslim materials to explain the beliefs of Christians. We have tried using Muslim authors or independent scholastic works for Islamic doctrine. One final note of warning – there are over one billion Muslims in the world. They have a multitude of teachings and beliefs. It is no more fair to characterize “all Muslims believe....” Based on teachings or writings of any particular person or group than it would be to characterize all Christians as believing what one televangelist might have to say on a particular show. That being said, we do set out certain core beliefs that seem to have the greatest support among the Muslim ideologists.

BACKGROUND

When two seeds are sprouting, it is often hard to determine exactly what plant is growing. The seed coat is shed, and often the first thing seen are not true leaves, but what botanists would call “cotyledon.” The true leaves come next. At this early stage, while comparing two plants, the uninitiated might consider two plants very similar when, in fact, they are hugely different, in size, shape, and function.

So it is with Christianity and Islam. An initial and superficial glance could easily show Islam and Christianity to have great similarities. There are a number of Christian scholars who consider Muhammad to have been more properly considered a Christian heretic, rather than just an instigator of a new faith.¹

¹ See, for example, the work of Giulio Basetti-Sani, *The Koran in the light of Christ: a Christian interpretation of the sacred book of Islam* (Franciscan Herald Press 1977).

Whether these scholars are correct or not, the differences between Islam and Orthodox Christianity go to the core of both faiths. Any plant grown from the roots of either will result in a vastly different tree.

Our format will consider basic subjects of Orthodox Christianity followed by the Islamic teaching on the same subject. We will then draw a few comparisons where the differences are not so clear. Obviously this is written from a Christian faith, so where Islam embraces a truth contrary to Christian truth, we try to explain the superiority of the Christian position.

As we approach this lesson, we should remember that Muhammad did not teach that Jews and Christians were worshipping a different God. For Muhammad, the God of Abraham, and the God of Jesus was the same one God that Muhammad worshipped. The Muslims call God “Allah,” but that is an Arabic word that references the one God. Muslims prefer the Arabic term because it refers only to God. The English “God” can be used to reference multiple “gods” (albeit without capitalization!)² The Koran was, for Muhammad, the Biblical God’s revelation for all people. It was a clarification of Biblical issues and a more direct clear recitation of God’s word, which had been corrupted over the centuries by Jews and Christians. Islam was not a “new religion” as much as it was a restoration of the original religion that God handed to Abraham.

NAMES

“Christianity” is the faith of “Christians.” Seems simple, no? “Christians” as a label or word was first used of the followers of Jesus Christ in Antioch, a city north of Israel in modern Syria. This expression was noted in New Testament times. The historian Luke records in Acts 11:26, “The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.” In the Greek used by Luke, “Christian” is merely the title “Christ” turned into an adjective (χριστιανος - “*Christianos*”). The first use we have of the word “Christianity” is from Ignatius of Antioch (see Church History Literacy lesson 6) around 110 A.D. Ignatius wrote, “Therefore, having become his disciples, let us learn to live in accordance with Christianity.”³

² In fact, Muslim theology teaches that there are 4,000 names of God, each expressing God’s different attributes. Only God knows 1,000 of the names. Angels and God know another 1,000. God, the angels and the prophets all know another 1,000. And the last 1,000 is known by God, Angels, prophets, and believers. Of these 1,000, 300 are in the Torah (first five books of the Old Testament), 300 in the Psalms, and 300 in the gospels. The last 100 are in the Koran. (Gabriel Mandel Khan, *Muhammad the Prophet*, (Thunder Bay Press 2001) at 96.

³ Ignatius, *Letter to the Magnesians* 10:1. (Lightfoot and Harmer translation)

We see here the core meaning of both Christian and Christianity. A “Christian” is one who follows “Christ.” Because “Christ” itself is a label given to Jesus of Nazareth, “Christian refers to those who follow Jesus believing that Jesus is the Messiah or Anointed one of God. “Christ,” the title we give Jesus, means “anointed” or “Messiah.” So “Christianity” is the faith of those who follow Jesus as “Christ.”

“Islam” comes from an Arabic root. Arabic, like other “Semitic” languages⁴ is based on three letter roots. Typically three consonants form a family of related words based on a core concept or meaning. In the case of Islam, the letters are “S,” “L,” and “M.” Those letters get various vowel sounds or other letters added which then vary the meaning. In Hebrew, another Semitic language, the same three core letters are used to make “*Shalom*” meaning “peace” (“S” and “Sh” are the same!). In Arabic, the core meaning of the consonants “S, H, M” is similar to the Hebrew. The letters have a core meaning of “surrender” or “peace.” “*Islam*” as a word references a “surrendering” to God or making peace with God. In Arabic adding an “M” to the “S, L, M” consonants makes one who “does Islam” or who surrenders to God. That is the word “*Muslim*.” So “Islam” is a faith of surrender to God, and a “Muslim” is one who practices “Islam.”

SCRIPTURE

Christianity uses the Bible as its scriptures. The Bible is both the Old and New Testament.⁵ The Bible itself sets forth its authority in passages like 2 Timothy

⁴ See the lesson last week on the origins of “Semitic” as a label for the group of languages that include Arabic and Hebrew. These languages grew from common roots and have distinct features from those languages that grew out of Europe, including the Romance languages (descending from Rome or Latin) and the Germanic languages (including English). So, for example, Semitic languages are written from right to left while European languages are written left to right.

⁵ Certain groups, notably the Roman Catholics, also use the Apocrypha as scripture. For background on this issue, please reference the Biblical Literacy lessons on the subject. The lessons are written from a protestant perspective and can be found at the website www.Biblical-Literacy.com. For a Catholic perspective, the Catholic Encyclopedia provides a good background and is also available online.

3:16-17, “All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Because of this core belief that in the Bible we have the very breath of God expressed for his people, Christians have worked for centuries to maintain the integrity and availability of those scriptures for humanity. Long before the advent of printing presses, great care was taken to see that correct copies of scripture were made and kept for the generations. One need only compare the unearthed Dead Sea scrolls and read these copies of Old Testament scrolls discovered in the 1940’s but written in the centuries preceding Christ to those copies of those same scriptures that were made after 1,000 A.D. When the comparison is made, one readily sees how carefully and accurately the texts were copied and transmitted.

Islam uses the Koran⁶ as its scriptures. The Koran is not divided into books like the Bible; rather it is one book divided into “*suras*” or chapters. There are 114 *suras* in the Koran. They are not arranged chronologically or by topic. There is no clear narrative pattern that one can follow reading the Koran (except for *sura* 12 which gives a narrative account of Joseph.) They are arranged in descending order of length, the longer ones first and the shorter ones last. Most modern versions of the Koran will give a title before each chapter/*sura* that tells how many verses are in the chapter (the ‘*ayat*’) as well as whether the chapter was revealed to Muhammad while in Mecca or Medina.

Muslims consider the Koran the literal word of God as written in Arabic. “It is God speaking, not merely to the Prophet [Muhammad] in seventh-century Arabia, but from all eternity to all humankind.”⁷ In the Koran we supposedly have the revelations of God transmitted to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel (see lesson last week). The Muslims do not see the Koran as “a book inspired or influenced by God or written under the guidance of His Spirit: rather it is viewed as God’s direct speech.”⁸

⁶ Also spelled Qur’an, depending on how one transliterates the Arabic word.

⁷ Farid Esack, *The Qur’an, a User’s Guide* (One World Publications Oxford 2005) at 100.

⁸ Farid Esack, at 31.

The Koran claims it is, “The revelation of the Book, in which there is no doubt, from the Lord of the universe. Do they perchance say, ‘He made it up’? No, this is the truth from your Lord.” (Kor. 32:2-3).

The Koran contains an assortment of material. Some of the verses are instructions on how to live while others give explanations of God and his work. For example, we read instruction for living in 16:115 where the Muslim is told to avoid eating “carrion and blood, and the flesh of swine, and anything offered up to other than God.” An example of teaching on God and his work is found in 32:4 where we read, “God is the one who created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in six days, then mounted the throne.”

The Koran contains many references to the Bible and people of the Bible. We read of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Moses David, Solomon, John the Baptist, Jesus and others. As referenced earlier, the story of Joseph told in the Koran (with a number of deviations from the story recorded in Genesis) is quite long.⁹

The Koran’s storylines and references to the Biblical people often conflicts with the Bible. The Muslim would tell you that the Bible is the corrupted text. The Christian response is one based on the historical accuracy and credibility of scripture. Here is where lessons we derive from scholastic study of scripture are invaluable. If the Bible is corrupted from its original state to the degree required for the Koran to be historically accurate, than there would surely be some evidence in the thousands of old manuscripts for the deviate readings and storylines in the Koran. But there is not. And what is more, we have renderings of New Testament

⁹ For example, in the Bible it is apparent that Potiphar believes that Joseph sought to abuse Potiphar’s wife and Potiphar “burned with anger” putting Joseph in prison (Gen. 39). The way Muhammad tells the story, Potiphar (Muhammad does not use his name) deduces that his wife was the seducer because Joseph’s shirt is ripped form the back as if he was fleeing rather than the front. So Potiphar rebukes his wife, “This was a trick of you women. Your trick is serious indeed!” Potiphar then tells Joseph to “Turn away from this” and his wife to “seek forgiveness for your sin; it was you in the wrong.” (12:25-29).

passages from reliably dated manuscripts that go back to the 100's. These passages and manuscripts clearly demonstrate the integrity of the scriptures that form the basis of Christian orthodoxy and the Bibles translated and used today.

The Christian would also note that if the Koran does not accurately convey the historical stories, then the validity of its accuracy on theology and doctrine is immediately suspect. God's very words could never be wrong.

CONVERSION

Christian doctrine teaches that one is saved by grace through faith. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8-10,

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

The “grace” that Paul writes of is the death of Christ for our sins, a death that we share by faith, bringing us into the resurrected Jesus for a new life. Christianity teaches that through Adam, sin came into the world and spread to all born of Adam. (Rom. 5:12). So everyone, even Abraham in the Old Testament, who has salvation or forgiveness of sins does so by faith. (Rom. 4 -5).

For Islam, peace with God comes from surrendering to God (the very meaning of “Islam”). Yet for the Christian it is more direct. Peace with God is found through a forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. (“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God *through our Lord Jesus Christ*” Rom. 5:1).

To become a Christian, one puts faith or trust into the sacrifice of Jesus Christ as atonement for sin. To the Christian, sin is a very real issue, an impediment that precludes fellowship with a perfect God. The sin must be put to death. A new life without sin must exist. That is the work done by God in Jesus. Jesus, fully God and fully man, dies with the sins of humanity and resurrects into a new life. Faith is the means by which humans can share in the death and resurrection. So in Jesus, sins are actually forgiven and an eternal life is found.

To become a Muslim, one is required to make a faith proclamation as well, the first of the five pillars or holy prescriptions of Islam.¹⁰ But the Muslim faith

¹⁰ Gabriel Mandel Kahn, *Muhammad the Prophet* (Thunder Bay Press 2001) at 70.

proclamation is not in Jesus. It is in the unity of God and the role of Muhammad. A Muslim convert proclaims, “There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God” before two male witnesses. That is the conversion process that makes one a Muslim.¹¹

When The Koran speaks of Jesus, much of what it says is correct, yet that which is most important, the atoning sacrifice, is missing. The Koran teaches that:

- Jesus was born of Mary (“O Mary, God has chosen you and purified you, chosen you over the women of all peoples” Kor. 3:42).
- Jesus was virgin born (“She said, ‘My Lord! How can I have a son, when no man has touched me?’” Kor. 3:47).
- At one point, the Koran evens calls Jesus the Messiah (“O Mary, God gives you good news of a word from God, named the Messiah, Jesus Son of Mary, honored in the world and the hereafter, and one of the intimates of God” Kor. 3:45).

As mentioned before, however, the Koran does not teach the atoning death of Jesus. In fact, as recounted in the Koran, it was not Jesus who was actually crucified! The Koran recounts the supposed crucifixion referencing those who said,

“‘We killed the Messiah Jesus, Son of Mary, messenger of God,’ whereas they did not kill him, they did not crucify him, although it was made to seem thus to them. As for those who differ on this, they are certainly in doubt about it. They have no knowledge about it, only following conjecture; but they surely did not kill him: rather God raised him up to the divine presence” (Kor. 4:157-158).

So instead of Jesus dying on the cross,¹² God takes Jesus up into Paradise, much like Enoch in the Old Testament. (“God said, ‘Jesus, I will take you unto Myself, and I will elevate you to Me.’” Kor. 3:55).

¹¹ Yousuf Lalljee, *Know your Islam* (Tahrike Tarsile Qur’an, Inc. 2003) p. 19.

¹² There is debate over this by some. While most see the Koran as not teaching a death and resurrection of Jesus, some believe that the Koran actually teaches his death referencing another passage where Jesus reportedly told Mary, “And peace is upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am resurrected alive.’ That was Jesus, Son of Mary.” (Kor. 19:33-34). Here the ambiguity of the Koran makes it difficult to determine exactly what is taught or whether there is an inconsistency.

Muhammad did not have a concept of original sin. The Koran teaches that man makes choices to sin or live righteously. “Mankind was created with freedom of choice, and since the beginning of the human race our Creator has chosen certain excellent individuals to inform mankind of God’s message and how to choose between right and wrong.”¹³ Missing is any teaching like Paul’s that we are all sinners (Rom. 3:9-10: “Jew and Gentile alike are all under sin ... There is no one righteous, not even one.”). The Koran does not teach the need for a price to be paid. It teaches rather that God forgives certain sin based on repentance and God’s forgiving nature. “to those who’ve done wrong in ignorance then repented and made amends thereafter – your Lord is most forgiving after that, most merciful.” (Kor. 16:119).

Without original sin, and without an atoning sacrifice, the Koran teaches a salvation that is works based. “One day every soul will come and debate about itself, and each soul will be paid in full for what it did” (Kor. 16:111). This is the very opposite of the Christian doctrine of forgiveness based on the finished work of Christ. In his handbook that educates people in Islam, Lalljee teaches, God “will reward or punish any person according to his deeds.”¹⁴

To the Christian, the judgment day is not a day where eternal destiny is based on works *as long as one has placed faith in Christ*. It is only those without faith that stand before God with their sin. For those in Christ, the sins have already been forgiven. The debt has been paid in full. This is the gospel of Paul, “Christ died for our sins” and “by this gospel you are saved” (1 Cor. 15:2-3).

CHURCH

In Acts 2, we read that those who became Christians, those who repented and put their faith in Jesus, were baptized into his church (Acts 2:41 “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about 3,000 were added to their number that day.”). The Greek for church, *ekklesia*, references those who are “called out.” The church is a fellowship of believers (Acts 2:42 “They devoted themselves to fellowship...”). It is a family related to each other and to God through Jesus Christ (Heb. 13:1 “Keep on living each others as brothers.”). It is the chosen people of God, the children of Abraham by faith as opposed to genetics (Rom. 4:16 “the promise comes by faith ... and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those that are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.”).

¹³ Lalljee at 21.

¹⁴ Lalljee at 21.

As a united people, we assemble together to encourage one another (Heb. 10:25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another...”) and to worship God. We sing songs, read scripture, pray, and listen to sermons (1 Cor. 14:26 “When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation ...”). We give offerings (1 Cor. 16:1 “On the first day of the week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income”) and we partake in sacraments, the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper, remembering his death until he comes again (1 Cor. 11:17-26 “When you come together ... whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes....”).

The Muslim faith is here quite different. A Muslim does not have a “church” per se. There are no real denominational differences, although there are different sects or branches of Islam (see, for example, the last lesson and the explanation of the Sunni /Shi’ite differences). Often these different sects will come to the same place for their prayers. For little doctrinal goes on at those services. When Muslims gather together, it is for prayer.

Their services will frequently have a teaching or “sermon” once a week (usually during the Friday services). They do not worship corporately in song. Nor do they take communion. There is not really any clergy in the sense that Christian churches have clergy.¹⁵

Muslims are to pray five times a day. These prayers are (1) between dawn and daybreak, (2) when the sun passes its zenith, (3) in late afternoon, (4) at sunset, and (5) at the onset of night. Before prayer, a Muslim is to wash. Then the Muslim expresses an intent to pray and raises his hands proclaiming “*Allahu akbar*” (Arabic for “God is great”). The Koran is recited and the individual then kneels on a prayer rug prostrating himself before God and praising God while asking for forgiveness. The believer then kneels and speaks various formulas completing the first of several cycles. When the cycles are all done, the person turns his head and says, “Al Salam alaykum wa Raamat al-Lah” (“Peace be unto you all, and the mercy of God and His bounties.”)¹⁶

¹⁵ Different branches of Islam believe differently in the teachers or instructors of the faith. Among the Shi’ites are a group known as “Twelvers.” These people believe that there were twelve perfect people since Muhammad that are considered “Imams” or leaders to guide Muslims in understanding their faith. These people list the first eleven Imams as historical people, but the twelfth (named Muhammad al-Mahdi) is considered invisible until God reveals him at the end of the age

¹⁶ See Lalljee at 205-239.

In Christianity we are told by Jesus to pray as he taught us (The Lord's Prayer is found in Mt. 5:9-13). Paul adds that we are to "pray continuously" (1 Thess. 5:17), conveying an attitude of conversation with and reliance on God. These are prayers where instead of worrying, "in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving," we present "our requests to God" (Phil. 4:6).

RIGHTEOUS LIVING

As one might expect from a faith that is works based, Islam has a great deal to say about how one should live righteously. The Muslim life is to be one of obedience to God, Muhammad, and leaders. ("O you who believe! Obey God, and obey the Messenger, and those charged with authority among you." Kor. 4:59).

Christianity teaches obedience to God first, recognizing that only God is good, and anyone else is fallible. Within that recognition, however, we are to honor and follow our leaders in Christ, but never when those leaders transgress God or the gospel.

The Koran announces punishment for those who "annoy God and His Messenger." They are cursed "in this world and in the Hereafter." Kor. 33:57. Obviously, this is not a concern in Christianity. No prophet is worship in the Christian faith. Only God is worshipped. The reason we worship Jesus is not because he was a prophet. It is because he is God!

The Koran teaches honesty in transactions. ("Give full measure when you measure, and weigh with a balance that is straight." Kor. 17:35). In this, Christianity is the same.

The Koran teaches against intoxicants (alcohol) and gambling. "O you who believe! Intoxicants and gambling ... are an abomination of Satan's handiwork. Eschew such that you may prosper." (Kor. 5:93). Christianity teaches against drunkenness and irresponsible stewardship, but has no absolute prohibition against any alcohol or gambling.

The Koran teaches strongly in many places about the need to be charitable. Charity, the rights of the underprivileged and down trodden, are themes constantly stressed. It is one of the reasons countries with great poverty have people who so readily embrace the Islamic faith. Christianity teaches the importance of the same. Christians are given special instructions to tend to the needy and underprivileged. (For both Islam and Christianity, we are talking here about what is taught, not necessarily what is always done!)

We have left out of this lesson the issues surrounding Muslim evangelism and use of the sword. There are significant differences among many in the Muslim world on these points. Some teach warfare as the requirement of the faith, while others teach that warfare is only appropriate when defending oneself. The Koran is used to support both approaches. Here we return to the principle that different sections of Islam follow different beliefs, much like we have seen in Christian history when we look at the Catholic /Protestant discord in Ireland and other places.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” (2 Tim. 2:15).
2. “Now brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you have received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you ... that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day” (1 Cor. 15:1-2)
3. “If we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned. As we have already said, so now I say again: if anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned” (Gal. 1:8-9).