



Islam

SESSION 1

Where did Islam originate? What do Muslims believe? What similarities and differences are there between Christianity and Islam? How can Christians and Muslims best relate to one another?

Introduction

No argument is needed for the importance of understanding Islam. That great religion occupies the attention of the world as never before in modern times. The thoughtful Christian seeks to get behind the sensational headlines, the biased stereotypes, and the polemics that so often characterize the treatment of Islam in the media. A Christian perspective on the subject will take into account what the people of Islam say about their faith and will seek humbly to understand how believers in Christianity and believers in Islam can best relate to one another. As a beginning, we ask five simple questions and thus make our way into the heart of the subject: (1) When did Islam begin? (2) Where did it begin? (3) Who was its founding figure? (4) How did Islam begin? (5) Why did it come into existence? The other units of this series have to do with Islam's beliefs and practices, the extent of its spread in the world, and the possibilities for fruitful relationships between the people of Islam and those of Christianity.

When?

When did Islam begin? We note two significant facts that help in understanding Islam from a Christian perspective. First, Islam began in the seventh century after Christ. By that time, the Christian church had spread to much of the ancient civilized world and had developed in many ways, organizationally and theologically. Its impact upon the surrounding culture took many forms. But of course, Christians knew nothing of Islam. By contrast, the first followers of Islam were fully aware of Christianity, its institutions, and its leadership. This difference in the "When" of each faith affects relationships between them even today.

CENTERS OF CHRISTIANITY

Centers of Christianity, called patriarchates, in the seventh-century Middle East were Constantinople, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, Ctesiphon (in Persia), and Armenia.

The second fact about the "When" question is that Islam is firmly rooted in history. Like Christianity, it depends upon datable events for its authentication. This sets it apart from other world religions such as Hinduism that conceive of the world and life as being part of a timeless cycle, without beginning or ending.

Where?

Islam arose in the Arabian Peninsula, an immense, largely desert area, nearly four times the size of the state of Texas. Its people were Arabs, closely akin ethnically to the Hebrews, and they made their living mostly by raising livestock and farming. The Arabs' vast homeland, with its few cities and dispersed population, played only a minor role on the world scene of the Middle East in the seventh century. There were two superpowers in that age and area: the Byzantine Christian Empire and the Persian Empire. At the time of Islam's beginning, these two empires had long been fighting each other for military and political power, but they had largely bypassed the land of the Arabs.

Looking at a map, it is easy to see why the ancient name for the Arabian Peninsula was *Jazirat al-'Arab*, or "The Island of the Arabs," set off as it is by water on three sides. The people were organized socially as tribes and lived in scattered small groupings. The most important city was Mecca in the western part of Arabia. It was a

trading center and also the location of an ancient shrine of worship. The Arabs' religion was animistic, but small colonies of Jews and Christians lived among them. The history of Islam begins in Mecca and then extends to another small place called Yathrib (later named Medina), more than two hundred miles north of Mecca.



Who?

Out of the world of Arabian polytheistic worship there emerged an exceptional figure who was to transform the religious life of the Arabs. His name was Muhammad ibn Abdullah. Born into a respected Meccan family in the year 570, he was orphaned at an early age and was cared for by members of his extended family. For forty years, he lived a fairly uneventful life. Muhammad never went to school, but like most Arabs of the time, he enjoyed a rich legacy of oral literature with its accompanying gifts of a highly developed memory and skill in using words. At the age of twenty, he began to work for a well-to-do businesswoman named Khadija, and at twenty-five he married her. Their marriage lasted twenty-five years until Khadija died. They had six children: four daughters and two sons. The boys died early in life.

Muhammad is said to have been a pensive man who reflected often on life and faith. His spirit was stirred with longing for a deeper religious experience than that found in traditional polytheism. He felt drawn toward

THE ISLAMIC CONCEPT OF A PROPHET

A prophet is a human messenger called by God to communicate to humanity a complete system of thoughts and actions, which, if followed, will result in the quality of life intended by the Creator.

other Arabs who, without being either Christians or Jews, believed in one god instead of a multiplicity of deities. Seeking enlightenment, he would on occasion withdraw from society for periods of meditation in the desert. Once in about 610 when he was spending time in an isolated mountain cave, he received the first of a long series of auditory revelations, or messages, which he was commanded to deliver to others. This spiritual experience transformed Muhammad's life. He became known as a prophet of Allah (the Arabic word for God). Those who accepted the message that he brought formed a community and followed Muhammad as their head. During the last twenty-two years of his life, he proved to be a strong and wise political leader as well as a guide for those who sought to worship Allah.

Believers in Islam cherish detailed records of his deeds, his speeches, his character, and his habits of life. However, as much as Muhammad is revered as an exemplary prophet of God, he is never worshiped.

To follow the tumultuous events of his later life, we must consider the question, "How did Islam begin?"

How?

Allah was not a word unknown to the Arabs. It was the name given to one of the deities in their religious system. They even considered Allah to be one of the chief gods. But Muhammad went home to Mecca from his mountain retreat to tell people that Allah was the true and living God, the creator of all that exists, the one who sustains all creatures with mercy and justice. This God, Allah, called for the worship and service of humankind. What was more difficult to Meccan hearers were words about God holding people accountable for their actions, about a time of judgment to come, and, strangest of all, about the power of God to bring about a resurrection of the dead. Also, Muhammad's messages singled out the social responsibility of believers to care for the poor and needy among them.

So this message offended two main elements of Meccan society, the commercial class, who resented Muhammad's talk about social justice and divine judgment, and the religious class, not always clearly distinguished from the businesspeople, who resented the talk about resurrection of the dead and especially the fact that in Muhammad's view Allah was the only god worthy of worship and service. In Mecca was located an ancient shrine called the *ka'ba*, dedicated to the many deities recognized by the Arabs. It was a point of pilgrimage and devotion whose importance could not endure the contradiction of Muhammad's message.

On the other hand, Muhammad's family and friends welcomed his message. They already had confidence in him as a person, and when he spoke with such power and sincerity of the new revelation that he had received, they joined him in prayer and obedience to Allah. Muhammad did not start out to found a new religion, but gradually the group around him took form as those following a way of worship and moral behavior called *Islam*, meaning "submission to the will, power, and authority of God."

As the years passed, opposition to Islam and to Muslims (people who follow Islam) grew. Meccan notables persecuted them, in one case instituting a two-year social and economic boycott against the emerging religious community. The situation became so strained that the Prophet sent one hundred Muslims to Ethiopia in the hope of finding a temporary refuge. The Christian Ethiopian emperor welcomed the refugees warmly.

The Emigration to Yathrib and Further Consolidation of the Muslim Community

Muhammad's reputation had spread beyond Mecca. Not only did his message create a stir in the surrounding area, but also his qualities as a leader had attracted notice. So, when the people of Yathrib, a cluster of settlements in an oasis some distance north of Mecca, were casting about for help in pacifying and unifying quarreling elements of their population, they asked the prophet Muhammad to come to their aid. In 622, Muhammad and about seventy of his fellow Muslims moved out from Mecca and emigrated to Yathrib. In the Muslim view of history, this emigration was a most momentous

event. It is remembered as the first year of the Islamic calendar, the year of the *hijra* ("emigration"). Eventually, too, the oasis, Yathrib, became known as the Muslims' city, or Medina. From then on, the course of Islam became a success story, in spite of sore trials by armed attacks of the old Meccan adversaries and by violent opposition from other enemies. Through it all during the next ten years, Muhammad, as a religious, political, and military leader, built an integrated community in Medina and won over many tribes of Arabia to the faith of Islam. At the same time, he continued to receive auditory revelations, and as he transmitted them to the people, he laid the foundations for the beliefs, practices, and ethics of Islam.

Return to Mecca and Final Victory

There remained one great obstacle to the free confession and practice of Islam in Arabia. That was the city of Mecca, the Prophet's home city and the seat of the fiercest opposition to him. However, his prestige had so increased that when, in 628, he marched against Mecca at the head of an army, the Meccans were amenable to making peace. It took two more years and some violent incidents, but finally, in 630, the holy city of Mecca passed into the hands of the Muslims. They purified the *ka'ba* of its polytheistic furnishings and associations, making it the focal point of pilgrimage as worshipers of the one true God. Then after two more years of intense diplomatic and military activity, the Prophet fell ill, perhaps of malaria, and in 632, he died quietly in Medina at the age of sixty-two. The stage was set for the dynamic expansion of Islam.

Why?

We recall that when answering the question, "When did Islam begin?" it was noted that there is no mention of that faith in the Bible or in early Christian writings. This is because Islam began over six hundred years after Christ. One might ask, on what basis, then, can Christians answer the question, "Why did Islam begin?" Various answers might be suggested. Maybe the economic situation of ancient Arabia favored the emergence of a new religion. Or maybe the social conditions of the people made them ripe for fresh beginnings religiously. Or did that era of history, with its particular display of power politics, set the stage for Islam's development? Or, in a more sinister vein, some might argue that Islam came forth as a world

religion deliberately to compete for human souls. All of these suggestions are speculations, some more valid than others. We are studying Islam from a Christian perspective, so we leave speculation aside and seek an explanation worthy of a Christian viewpoint, that is, one resulting from a humble and respectful listening to those fellow human beings who confess their faith in Islam.

Muslims themselves have a coherent answer to the “Why” of their faith. We Christians may have some difficulties with their explanation, but by hearing it carefully, we are plunged into the adventure of Christian–Muslim relationships, an enterprise whose time has fully come. Session 4 of this course will take us deeper into this subject.

Muslims believe that Muhammad the Prophet was the last of a long line of prophets whom God has sent to humanity since the creation of the world. The Prophet’s message was essentially the same at all times, though clothed in many cultural and linguistic forms. Since Islam appeared in the Middle East, it was only natural that Muhammad’s message should make reference primarily to religions in that area, namely Judaism and Christianity. Islam came not to abrogate or deny these but to confirm and fulfill them. In one of the Prophet’s messages to his people, recorded in the Muslims’ holy scriptures, this truth is expressed as follows:

Say: We believe in God and in what was revealed to us, in what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes of Israel, and in what was

granted to Moses, Jesus and the Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between them, and to Him (God) we submit.

Koran 3:84, translation by the author

In answer to the question, “Why did Islam appear?” Muslims affirm that in the divine wisdom, Muhammad came as the final prophet to humankind, to seal, as it were, the succession of messengers that had been granted to the human race from the beginning. And this final gift of God’s mercy was communicated in the language of the Arabs, a people who heretofore had never had a revelation in their tongue.

The purpose of Islam’s existence is vividly expressed in the pungent words of the Prophet himself, as recorded in the books of recollections of his words and deeds. One time a person asked Muhammad as he was preaching to the people, “What are you claiming to be?” He replied, “A prophet.” And the questioner continued, “What is that?” Muhammad answered, “God sent me.” Then a further question, “What did he send you to do?” The reply, “He sent me to bring people together, to destroy idols and to proclaim the oneness of God.”¹

About the Writer

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Endnote

1. *Sahih Muslim, Prayer of Travelers, 294.*