



Islam

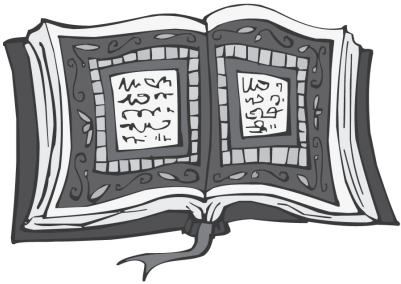
SESSION 2

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?

Koran

The Koran is the scripture of Islam. It is a book approximately the length of the New Testament, and for Muslims it contains the messages from God delivered by the Prophet to his people. These words were remembered by Muhammad's followers and compiled in the book whose title means "Recitation." The Prophet is not considered to be the author of the Koran. He was, for Muslims, the human instrument used to transmit in oral form the divine words of revelation. These words

are held to be inseparable from the way in which they were sent, that is, in the Arabic language. From that fact comes the conviction that the Koran cannot be adequately translated into other languages.



The scripture is arranged in chapters, 114 in number. Each chapter has a name, and all except one begin with the words "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate." The Koranic language is a rhymed prose, that is, without meter, and it is intended to be read aloud. In Islam, the public oral recitation of the sacred text in Arabic is one of the most appreciated forms of art. The Koranic style is somewhat reminiscent of the prophetic messages in the Old Testament: solemn words about the nature of God, encouragement to faith, exhortations, warnings, allusions to historical events, and predictions of the future. There are also extended passages giving instructions for human behavior. Here are some verses that speak of the nature of God:

God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The divine light may be likened to a niche within which

is a lamp in a glass. This glass is like a shining star lit from a blessed olive tree which comes neither from the east nor from the west, and whose oil seems to glow by itself, though no fire touched it. Light upon light! God guides whom he will to his light. He speaks in parables to humankind. And God is all-knowing.

The Chapter of the Light, 24:35

The Koran is not a book of history even though it alludes to many historical events. It mentions a number of biblical personalities, such as Adam, Abraham, Job, Moses, Joseph, and others. Jesus and his mother, Mary, have a prominent place in the text.

Although the Koran is mainly a book of preaching, calling its hearers to repentance, faith, and a life of obedient service to God, it is also regarded by many Muslims and non-Muslims as the source of all that is best in education. Liturgy, grammar, literature, theology, elocution, and jurisprudence all take their primary inspiration from the holy scripture.

Hadith

Second only to the Koran in authority for the Muslim community are the collections of Hadith. This word means "report" or "narration" and refers to the reports that circulated among the first generations of Muslims regarding the words and deeds of the Prophet. Those who knew him personally, called Companions, gathered recollections of their beloved leader and circulated them by word of mouth among their fellow believers. Gradually, the telling and the learning of Hadith became structuralized into one of the honored occupations of pious believers.

QUR'AN OR KORAN?

Two English spellings are used for the Muslims' holy scripture: *Qur'an*, an exact transliteration of the Arabic, and *Koran*, adapted to American spelling. At the following Web site, a complete English translation of the Koran may be found: <http://web.umar.edu/~msaumr/Quran/>.

Hadith include words spoken by Muhammad giving his opinions, judgments, and reactions regarding all kinds of social, moral, political, and theological matters. Also, the Companions reported on his behavior in a variety of circumstances both in public life and in his family relations.

After about a century and a half, large written collections of Hadith began to appear. But in their written form they still retained the traits of their original oral composition. The texts are usually short discontinuous units, each one communicating an integral message. They contain lively narrative in vigorous, conversational style, concrete and colorful language, and frequent repetition.

As Islam grew, the number of Hadith increased likewise. Scholarly leaders saw that it was easy for overly zealous or even unscrupulous people to spread reports from the Prophet that were not authentic. To control such abuse, Hadith scholars instituted a discipline of authentication called the chain of transmission. This meant that each Hadith had to carry with it a list of those individuals who, from one generation to the next, were responsible for passing it on. To make this system work, scholars studied the lives and careers of every transmitter named in a chain to be sure that they were people of integrity and knowledge.

Every single entry in the authoritative collections carries a validating chain. This is a typical example:

Adam ibn Abi Iyas informed us that Shu`ba narrated from Abd Allah ibn Abi al-Safar and Isma`il who received it from al-Sha`bi, who in turn received it from Abd Allah ibn Amr (May God be pleased with the two of them), who heard the Prophet (Blessings and peace be upon him) say: "A Muslim is one who does no harm to (other) Muslims either by tongue or by hand. And an emigrant [referring to those who emigrated from Mecca to Medina] is one who gives up all that God has forbidden."

From the Collection of al-Bukhari

The great effort taken to preserve and pass on Hadith must have had more to it than mere biographical interest in the Prophet. The example of his life communicated by the Hadith provided the basis for Muslim religious practices. It also furnished a living commentary on the Koran and functioned as a primary source of Muslim jurisprudence, the science of human behavior under the rule of Almighty God. So it is almost impossible to overstate the importance of Hadith in the life of Muslims. For them the Koran is revelation, and the Hadith are practical guidance on how to live in the light of revelation.

Doctrines

Considering how many Muslims there are, more than a billion, and how many countries and cultures they represent (see Session 3), one might suppose that it is misleading to list in a few paragraphs the beliefs of that religion. However, Islam is remarkably simple and straightforward in its doctrinal framework. Therein lies much of its appeal to its adherents, who express their faith similarly in a bewildering variety of languages and cultures.

The Koran announces the beliefs of Muslims, but not in a systematic order. In the centuries following the life of Muhammad, believers formulated their doctrines in a logical manner, and every generation has witnessed much writing and discussion on the content of the faith.

The Oneness of God

The existence of God is a self-evident reality to Muslims. They affirm resoundingly that God is One, unique as the final cause of everything in the universe and the only one who is ultimately good.

Angels

Another tenet of Islamic doctrine is the belief in angels of the Almighty who permeate the universe to do the divine bidding. Some of these are named in the Koran, and one, Gabriel, is said to have been the intermediary who delivered to Muhammad the revelations from God that became the Koran.

Prophets and Scriptures

Prophets are human messengers sent by God to different peoples throughout human history. Of the thousands of prophets that have been sent, several

figure prominently in the Koran, such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. Prophets have announced the message of God's oneness and have made known the divine commandments for human beings. Some prophets were given the task of communicating scriptures to their people. Among these were Moses, Jesus, and, of course, Muhammad, who came as the last of the line of prophetic messengers.

The Resurrection and the Last Judgment

Islam insists on the seriousness of human life. There is a goal to which human beings should aspire, knowing that their every deed is heavy with consequence for the future. All things will finally be summed up after death at the judgment, and the dead will be raised by divine power to a new life. Ultimate justice will prevail, as those who lived righteously are rewarded and wickedness is punished.

The Divine Decree

The last belief affirms that God Almighty in wisdom and power not only rules in the affairs of the world and will stand as the master on the day of judgment but also has decreed from eternity all that takes place in the earth. Taken by itself, this belief would seem to render human effort and thought meaningless, since all has been foreknown and foreordained. It would make humanity merely the instrument of the almighty decree, the prisoner, as it were, of fate. However, the Koran also affirms that humans are responsible for their actions. So there is a dynamic tension between the beliefs in God's sovereignty and in human freedom. This tension has occupied the thought of some of the best minds in Islamic history.

Practices

Christians will have recognized many similarities between Muslim beliefs and theirs, but the practices of Islamic faith are strikingly different and require special attention. The main practices are called the "Pillars" of Islam and are five in number. Islam is an eminently practical faith, and evidence of this is seen in the fact that the Pillars (supports) are not doctrines but practices. They are (1) The Confession of Faith, (2) Prayer, (3) Donation to Charity, (4) Fasting, and (5) Pilgrimage to Mecca.

The Confession of Faith

The first practice consists of the believer's personal witness to his or her faith. Its two-part structure expresses as a creed concisely what it means to be a Muslim: "I witness that there is no deity except God, and I witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God." Muslims recite this creed several times every day, and it provides a stabilizing influence in their lives, implying an appeal to God's power and mercy in all of the demands of life.

Prayer

Ritual prayer is the central act of Muslim worship, and its practice is carefully prescribed for all believers above the age of puberty. It may be performed by an individual alone or by a group. Its times are fixed, five in number: dawn, noon, midafternoon, sunset, and night. The language of ritual prayer is required to be Arabic. Its gestures are also prescribed: first a ceremonial and symbolic washing of the face and limbs and then a series of postures, recitations, and periods of silence. This prayer, varying slightly from one time of day to the other, consists largely of praise to God, but it also includes requests for mercy and guidance. Prayer in a group may take place anywhere, but usually people gather in a mosque on Friday at noon for a service. At that time, one of the community's leaders usually delivers a sermon. A worshiper recites the first chapter of the Koran during every prayer period. This chapter, named "The Opener," is translated as follows:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the
Compassionate.
Praise be to God, the Lord of the Worlds,
The Merciful, the Compassionate,
Master of the Day of Judgment.
You we worship; you we ask for help.
Guide us in the straight path,
The path of those whom you have blessed,
Not the path of those who have incurred your
wrath,
Nor of those who have gone astray.

Donation to Charity

Muslims are required to give 2.5 percent of their total wealth each year to charitable causes. This donation

is considered an act of worship and a means of experiencing a certain unselfish detachment from worldly possessions. Fulfilling this duty is usually left up to the conscience of each Muslim, but in some countries government agencies attend to the collection and distribution of the annual donation.

Fasting

One month in the Islamic year is devoted to fasting by all adult Muslims. During this period, called Ramadan, the believers abstain from all eating and drinking during the daylight hours. Daily work should continue as usual, and where possible people observe supplementary devotional exercises at the mosque or at home. Ramadan is intended to draw the believer closer to God. A day may begin with a meal taken in the early morning hours, although this is not required. Then at dawn the rigorous fast begins, to be broken only at sunset. The nights of Ramadan are often taken up with social visiting and entertainment.

Muslims say that fasting puts the rich and the poor on the same level for a while, thus helping the more fortunate to feel compassion for the unfortunate. Muhammad taught that abstinence from food carries a moral meaning. He said, "If you do not give up lying there is no need for you to give up eating and drinking." Muslims insist that in addition to feeling better physically while fasting, they also find it easier to concentrate on the moral struggle against the baser tendencies of human nature.

The Pilgrimage to Mecca

The once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca, birthplace of the Prophet, is the only Pillar of Islamic practice that is not absolutely required of every believer. Only those who are financially able are obligated to perform the pilgrimage. Interestingly enough, when pilgrims go to Mecca, the focus of their attention is not so much upon the Prophet Muhammad as upon the Prophet Abraham, who, according to the Koran, established the *ka`ba* in Mecca as a holy place to worship the true God. Later, its meaning was lost to polytheistic Arabs who made it a place of idol veneration. Then finally it was reclaimed by Muhammad for its original intent. So, when Muslims

go to Mecca on pilgrimage, they relive by liturgical and devotional acts the Abrahamic elements of their faith. They dress in identical garments of white cloth to remind themselves of Abraham's time. They pray while processing around the *ka`ba*. At another time, they throw stones at a masonry pillar to commemorate Abraham's rejection of satanic temptations. Finally, on a certain day, the pilgrims sacrifice an animal in memory of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son in obedience to the divine command. This story is found in the Koran and the Bible, relating how God substituted an animal for the son offered by Abraham. The sacrifice of an animal, usually a sheep, is repeated on that same day throughout the world, as Muslims everywhere join in solidarity with the pilgrims in Mecca. The occasion is called the Festival of Sacrifice and is full of symbolic meaning.

Social Duties

The Five Pillars of religious practice hold the world of Muslims together in a remarkable spiritual unity. However, along with a uniformity of religious duty, there exists a considerable diversity in social behavior. Early in Islamic history, the believers extracted from the Koran and the Hadith a code of social behavior covering practically all aspects of life: marriage, divorce, commerce, judicial procedures, inheritance, contracts, taxation, welfare, and politics. This code of social relationships is called the *sharia*, or Islamic law. Through the centuries, several distinct interpretations, or "schools" of law, have emerged, making for some variation in practice. Underlying or mixing with the *sharia* are ancient codes of traditional behavior, much older even than Islam. These vary greatly from one country to another. And added to these are the new demands and resources of modern technological civilization worldwide. This means that if one asks, "What is the Islamic practice in such and such circumstances?" there can be several answers.

About the Writer

R. Marston Speight is a retired missionary-minister of the United Methodist Church and former director of the Office for Christian-Muslim Relations of the National Council of Churches.