

# Our Neighbor's Faith – Islam

## History and Description<sup>1</sup>

Islam might be one of the most loaded and often misunderstood groups that we will talk about. The word “Islam” means “peace” or “submission” in Arabic. More than one-fifth of the world’s population are Muslims (people who practice Islam), in more than 40 countries. Indonesia has the largest concentration, followed by Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. Muslims were among the earliest settlers in North America: certain customs of slaves in the 1700s can be traced to their Islamic heritage. Arabs who came to the United States in the early 1900s practiced Islam in their homes, so were not highly visible. There are now six to eight million Muslims in the U.S., including immigrants, recent converts, and first- and second-generation Muslim Americans. Islam is commonly considered the fastest-growing religion in the U.S.

The objective of Islam is to live for the pleasure of Allah, who created humankind to serve Him only, and in that service one finds the peace or submission mentioned already. Allah is one of the names of the one God, and any name for or reference to God in Muslim practice is always written in all caps, to give reverence to the holy name. It is beyond offensive for a Muslim to deface or ridicule the name of God or the Prophet Muhammad.

Islam is based on the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abdullah, who lived between 570-632. When he was 40 years old he received the first revelation from Allah, thus beginning his prophethood. Whenever he received revelation, he recited it to his followers, who memorized and wrote down every word. Over 23 years, Allah’s revelations through the Archangel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad were collected and became the Holy Qur’an (sometimes spelled Koran).

The Qur’an appeals to reason, and serves as a guide and warning to all humankind. It talks about what is lawful and unlawful, the resulting rewards and punishments, and the criteria for justice. It teaches how to serve Allah in order to reach the ultimate goal of Paradise in the next life.

Muslims live out the teachings in the Qur’an in a lifestyle structured on the Five Pillars of Islam: Faith (testimonial of Allah’s oneness); Prayer (performed at least five times a day); Charity (after taking care of the necessities of life, giving an annual donation of 2.5% of wealth to the poor); Fasting (during the month of Ramadan); and Pilgrimage (to Mecca, in Saudi Arabia, required of all who are able, once in life).

Through the Pillars and other teachings, Islam is not thought of by its followers as just a religion, separate from other parts of life; rather, it is a complete system of life. There are weekly congregational prayer services on Fridays, but there is no separate Sabbath or holy day; through the prayers and other practices, every day is a day of worship.

The cornerstone of Islam is that Allah is one, and following out of that basic core statement are the Principles of Faith: belief in Allah, belief in his angels, belief in his books, belief in his messengers, belief in the day of judgment, belief in life after death, and more. It is believed that everyone experiences eternal life after death; one’s earthly conduct, either more good or bad,

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<sup>1</sup> Honoring Our Neighbor’s Faith, Augsburg Fortress, 2016, pp. 67-71.

determines if that eternity is spent in Paradise or the wrath of hell. All people are believed to have an equal opportunity to choose, by their words and deeds, what kind of eternity.

Islam also has teachings and writings about Adam and Eve; about Abraham and his family; and teachings about Jesus. Jesus, however, is said to be created (not God's only-begotten Son); he is the Messiah of Israel; a prophet, not God; he was neither crucified nor resurrected, but he is one who will return in the last days. In other words, he is an important guy, but just a guy.

Muslims do not believe in a concept like original sin; humankind was born without sin and with the capacity to be and do good for the pleasure of Allah and the benefit of the person's soul.

One must be very clear on the differences between what is actual Muslim belief and practice and what is cultural practice from predominantly Muslim areas, like the Middle East, parts of Africa, and parts of Central and Southeast Asia. One small example is that women are required to cover their hair; but not, according to the Qur'an, their faces. Both sexes are supposed to dress modestly in garments that do not reveal physical attributes. Also, there are different branches of Islam (major ones are Suni and Shia), as well as more radical and fanatical offshoots (like in any religion, even Christianity) that distort the teachings they follow to justify things like terrorism and war.

Islamic history includes periods of persecution and relocation, especially in the early years. To escape, many sought and received refuge and protection from the Christian king of Ethiopia. Eventually they migrated to Medina, in modern day Saudi Arabia, where they were warmly received. There were also times of widespread growth and amazing cultural contributions to architecture, education, medicine, economics, science, mathematics, literature, and the arts, building libraries, schools, universities, mosques, and communities. Many of these advances occurred during Europe's Dark Ages. Europeans studied Islam during the Renaissance.

There are two main Islamic holidays, which are celebrated with congregational prayer and a sermon, as well as great feasts, gift-giving, visits from family and friends, community festivals, carnivals, and more. The first is Eidul Fitr, which celebrates the end of Ramadan (the ninth month in the Muslim lunar calendar during which a fast is required: no food during daylight hours, except for children and the sick). The second is called Eidul Adha, which celebrates the end of pilgrimage and the Prophet Abraham's devotion and obedience to Allah at the near-sacrifice of his son. As in Abraham's story, animals are sacrificed; as part of the celebration, the meat is distributed to the poor.

A few other terms you may have heard are: Jihad (the challenge to achieve submission, piety, and obedience to Allah - *not* a holy war); Zakah (the obligatory distribution of wealth); Hajj (the once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca, in Saudi Arabia); and Imam (the respected title given to the leader of an Islamic community/mosque); mosque (a place of worship and gathering).

Because they share so many common ancestors of the faith and scripture, Muslims sometimes refer to Jews, Muslims, and Christians together as "people of the book." This shared identity is often overshadowed, unfortunately, by fighting and war, especially in Jerusalem, a city that all three groups consider holy and "theirs."

Statistics: As of 2011, there were 2,600,000 members and 2,106 congregations of Muslims practicing in the country. (For comparison, the ELCA in 2010 was at 4,181,219 and 9,846.)

## Experience

Let's check out a few things this week. First off, for some National Geographic documentary-style info on Islam, especially the hajj pilgrimage, check out [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jM81wroj\\_MQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jM81wroj_MQ).

There are five Mosques in the Richmond area that come up on a google search. There isn't an "official" Muslim website for the U.S.; however, there are a number of national organizations whose websites you can explore; just find and read the "about us" section first to see what the background and goals of each organization are as stated.

On a different note, check out the website of the longest standing (and almost the oldest) mosque in the country: in Cedar Rapids, IA: <http://mothermosque.org>. Finally, if you have some extra time, you can check out the Canadian sitcom called *Little Mosque on the Prairie* on Amazon Prime Video.

Before this conversation, what came to mind when you heard the words "Islam" or "Muslims"? How about now?

Comparison with the ELCA<sup>2</sup>:

<u>Islam</u>	<u>ELCA</u>
1. Believe that God (Allah) is one.	1. Believe in the triune God - one God in three persons.
2. Believe that revelations to a number of God's prophets, including Jesus, culminated in those to the prophet Muhammad.	2. Believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that his life, death, and resurrection completed God's work of our salvation.
3. See Islam as a total way of life.	3. See people as instruments of God in the world, not separate from it.
4. Look to the Qur'an (the words of God through Gabriel to Muhammad) as the primary source for faith and practices.	4. Look to the Bible - Old and New Testaments - as the only written word of God.
5. Try to live according to the five Pillars of Faith.	5. No comparable framework, but look to teachings such as the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount.
6. Congregational prayer held on Friday, during which men and women assemble separately for prayer and hear a sermon by the imam.	6. Liturgical form typically includes hymns, prayers, readings, sermon, and Holy Communion based on ecumenical patterns.
7. Local Islamic communities led by imams. Explicit rules in Qur'an guide community life.	7. Interdependent congregational, regional, national, and global expressions of the church are characterized by democratic decision making, strong ecumenical relationships, elected leadership, and an ordained ministry.
8. Islam provides much of the believers' identity. Family-oriented, strong sense of community. Education is highly valued.	8. Strong emphasis on doctrine with Christian life expected to proceed from faith in Christ. Individuals and the whole church are expected to make faith active in love.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

What we Lutherans can learn...

Among other things:

1. Lutherans are taught to daily remember their baptism, and we are encouraged to pray and read the Bible every day. However, we could learn from the Five Pillars of Islam - especially the praying - on concrete ways to make every day a day of worship, and to keep focused on our faith as a way of life.
2. Also related to the Pillars are practices like charity and fasting that help to keep followers from getting too turned-in on themselves; again, Lutherans encourage any practice like fasting as a way of deepening faith, and generosity as a way of life; but we could learn how to make such practices more second nature.

Let's pray:

Almighty and eternal God, gather into your embrace all those who call out to you under different names. Bring an end to fighting between religions, and make us more faithful witnesses of the love made known to us in your Son; we especially pray today for our sisters and brothers in the community of Islam. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Amen.**