

MUSLIM BELIEFS ABOUT CHRIST AND CHRISTIANITY

Several basic issues dominate a Muslim's attitude about Christianity

Muslims believe that Jews and Christians have deliberately distorted the Old and New Testaments to hide the predictions of the coming of Muhammad. They assume that we, as followers of Christianity, believe three gods. The *Koran* teaches that the Christian Trinity is composed of God, Mary and Jesus.

Islam reject Jesus as the Son of God. The Muslim believes that Jesus did not die on the cross, but another, such as Judas Iscariot or Simon of Cyrene, was crucified in His place. Further, they believe that God saved Jesus from the cross to spare God's honor. Muslims accept Christ as a prophet only.

The Muslim concept of sin and salvation is radically different from that of the New Testament. A great deal of confusion exists in Islam about what constitutes sin. The only exception is the sin of associating another god with *Allah (shirk)* which cannot be forgiven. Sin, to the average Muslim, is failure to live up to the Islamic moral code and failure to perform the requirement of the five or six pillars of Islam. The Muslim mystic fears hell fire, or purgatory. He believes that since no man can pay for another's sins, he must suffer for his own, but that he will eventually be rescued from purgatory by the intercession of Muhammad.

OVERVIEW OF THE TEACHINGS OF ISLAM

In the seventh century, Muhammad, thought to be the last prophet in a line that includes Abraham, Moses, the Biblical prophets, and Jesus, found a strict, monotheistic religion in reaction to the polytheism and lawlessness of the existing Arab culture. Within a century, Islam had conquered an area greater than the Roman Empire at its height. Today, Islam is almost the sole religion of all Arab countries and has major communities in Africa.

Muslims reject the title "Muhammadanism," for Muhammad is thought to be only the carrier of the truth and not divine in any way. The *Koran*, for the most part a series of short teachings, is intensely revered by Muslims as the final Word of God, the culmination of what was only begun in the Bible. The word *Islam* refers to the peace that comes from surrender to God. *Shi'ites* believe that religious leaders should also be political rulers, whereas the majority of Muslims, the *Sunnites*, believe in a separation of the two realms. *Sufis* form the mystical branch of Islam, teaching an arduous path of self-denial culminating in union with God.

God

Allah means "the God," indicating the radical monotheism of Islam. "We shall not serve anyone but God, and we shall associate none with Him" (*Koran* 3.64). Any division of God is rejected, including the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. ("It is not meant for God to have children" {19.921}).

The majesty and might of Allah is often portrayed in the *Koran*, and it is emphasized that his purposes are always serious. Justice is Allah's most important feature for Muslims.

Allah is also merciful and compassionate, but that mercy is shown mainly in his sending messengers who proclaim the truth of man's responsibility to live according to Allah's dictates.

Man and the Universe

Muslims see the universe as created by the deliberate act of a personal, omnipresent God. The universe is often considered an illusion in any way and is basically good, being given for the benefit of man. Muslim respect for the world order led to the development of sciences in Arab countries long before developments in Europe.

Muhammad did not produce miracles but simply proclaimed the message of Allah. Thus, the presence of God in the world is seen not through supernatural signs but through the wonderful order of nature and the one great miracle, the *Koran*. Muslims generally do not expect miraculous deliverance from suffering in this life but believe that good deeds will be rewarded in the next life.

Man is considered a sort of vice-regent, in charge of creation under the authority of God. His purpose—and the goal of Islam—is to make a moral order in the world.

Man is endowed with *taqwa*, a sort of divine spark manifested in his conscience that enables him to perceive the truth and to act on it. Conscience is thus of the greatest value in Islam, much as love is the greatest value to Christians.

But Islam is in no way pantheism. Man may cultivate his *taqwa* and so live according to the way of Allah, or he may suppress it. Thus man deserves or is undeserving of God's guidance.

Salvation and the Afterlife

The *Koran* rejects the notion of redemption; salvation depends on a man's actions and attitudes. However, *tauba* (repentance) can quickly turn an evil man toward the virtue that will save him. So Islam does not hold out the possibility of salvation through the work of God but invites man to accept God's guidance.

The final day of reckoning is described in awesome terms. On that last day, every man will account for what he has done, and his eternal existence will be determined on that basis: "Every man's actions have we hung around his neck, and on the last day shall be laid before him a wide-open book" (17.13).

Morals

Islam presents a “straight path” of clear-cut duties and commands. Islamic morals are a combination of genuine acts of love and justice on the one hand and legalistic performance on the other.

Muhammad is pictured in the *Koran* as a loving person, helping the poor and slow to take revenge. Nevertheless, the firm belief that Muslims possess the one truth has led to much violence on the behalf of Allah through the ages.

Worship

Muhammad is not worshiped; only God is. Because of strict rules against depictions of human forms in art, there is a strong impetus against idolatry or saint-worshiping in Islam. Allah is extolled in hymns that depict his power and majesty. But even Allah cannot be ultimately leaned on for salvation, because salvation is man’s responsibility. Thus, his guidance, in the form of words rather than persons, is emphasized.

For that reason, the *Koran* is revered as perhaps no other book. It is probably the most memorized book in the world.

HOW TO WITNESS TO MUSLIMS

Those who anticipate dialogue with Muslims must consider a method of approach. No other faith, not even Judaism, is so resistant to the “soul-winning” or “plan of salvation” approach to witnessing.

When discussing the Bible with a Muslim, it is important that verses be read in context.

The Muslim will be impressed with a Christian’s words only if he experiences genuine friendship from the Christian and sees him living a moral life.

In most Muslim countries, physical contact with persons of the opposite sex is forbidden until after engagement and marriage.

Pray for discernment, love, and patience in trying to understand a Muslim friend and his culture.

Christians witnessing to Muslims have discovered that friendship accompanied by a study of the Gospels constitutes the most powerful witness.

Americans are finding that the “mission field” has been brought to their neighborhood. There are more Muslims in the United States than there are Assemblies of God and Church of God church members combined!

Give a reason for the hope that is within you