

Opportunities to Affect: In Reading Groups

By Michael McCullar

A Christian's Guide to Islam

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A common question today is, “why do we as Christians need to seek an understanding of Islam?” There are an amazing number of responses to this question, but a couple quickly stand out from all the rest. First, we as followers of Christ are called to take the gospel message to all people, which obviously includes Muslims; and second, Christians need a basic understanding of Islam in order to achieve successful and productive dialogue. Islam is the second fastest growing religion, and it reaches into every corner of the world. Bernard Lewis sums up the uniqueness of Islam like this: “The word Islam denotes more than fourteen centuries of history, a billion and a third people, and a religious and cultural tradition of enormous diversity.”

MUHAMMAD

Muhammad was born approximately 570 years after Jesus. His early life was marred by the loss of both parents and his grandfather, thus he spent much of his youth with an uncle who operated a caravan business throughout Arabia, Syria, and Palestine. This led to Muhammad's expertise in leading caravans and his marriage to a wealthy, older widow who hired him to run her business. Sudden wealth also allowed him to pursue contemplative retreats into the caves, especially during the pagan holy month of Ramadan. It is on such a retreat in 610 that Muhammad was spoken to by Gabriel and called to be Allah's final prophet. He resisted for a short time but finally accepted his calling to preach a message of equality, monotheism, and unity to the Arabs. He received 114 revelations that combined to form the Qur'an, the Holy Book of Islam.

1. What caused Muhammad's cool reception from the various tribes of Mecca?
2. What factors led to Muhammad's failure to influence the Meccans?
3. What did Muhammad do differently in Medina that led to his eventual success?
4. Assess the impact of Muhammad's teaching in light of the conversion of virtually all of Arabia to Islam.

SUCCESSION

Muhammad died in his sixties with no succession plan in place. At the time of his death, Islam was growing and expanding in the Middle East. His death fractured the spirit of unity and halted expansion as the older leaders struggled to select a successor. Arabic tradition held that family line

determined all lines of succession. A group emerged supporting Ali, cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, to assume leadership. Another group, wishing to break with tradition and name the most qualified Muslim, opted for Abu Bakr, early convert and advisor to Muhammad. Bakr won the vote and led Islam for several positive years. Upon his death, the debate again centered upon “family line” or “most qualified,” and again Ali lost the vote. The second successor was assassinated. The debate remained the same as successor three was selected, with Ali losing again. This loss created a schism between the two camps. Another assassination followed, and Ali was finally chosen to lead Islam. His was a smart and unifying tenure, but he, too, was killed by a dissident. Soon afterwards, Ali's son was also assassinated, and this led to the permanent split in Islam; Sunni and Shi'a.

1. What direction did Islam take upon the death of Muhammad?
2. In your opinion, would Islam remained intact if Ali had been selected earlier?
3. Contrast Sunni and Shi'a Islam.
4. Will the two branches of Islam ever realign?

QUR'AN

Qur'an literally means “recitation” or “readings.” The words spoken to Muhammad came from Allah (Arabic for God) through Gabriel. Over a period of twenty-three years, Muhammad received 114 revelations, and these came together to form the Qur'an. These revelations were recorded on different surfaces or memorized and were put into book form after Muhammad's death. Muslims do not believe that Muhammad was the first to receive the words of the Qur'an. They teach that both the Christians and the Jews were given the exact words but had perverted them over time. Thus, the Qur'an was Allah's final address to humankind.

1. Describe differences between the Christian Bible and the Qur'an.
2. What is abrogation and how does it affect Islamic teaching?
3. What are the differences between the Qur'an and the Hadith and Sunnah?
4. What does the Qur'an teach about Jesus?

BELIEFS & PRACTICES

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Islam is built upon five basic tenets known as the Five Pillars. The pillars include a statement of faith, prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and the pilgrimage to Mecca. It is required of each Muslim to adhere to these “basics” that separate Islam from all other religions. Islam also teaches that angels are intimately involved with each Muslim and the reality of a Satan. Islam also believes in a day of judgment and an eternal existence beyond this life. Paradise is reserved for good Muslims and is built upon sensual delights. Hell is to be a painful existence of unimaginable horrors.

1. Contrast Islamic prayer with that of Christianity.
2. Is the Shahada, or profession of faith, all that is necessary for salvation?
3. What are Jinn?
4. How is the Christian heaven different from the Islamic paradise?

ISLAMIC LAW

Islam draws no distinction between the secular and the spiritual. Shari’a is the Arabic word for “path” and is used to define the all-inclusive law of Islam. Shari’a is designed to demonstrate Islam’s overarching focus on both forbidding sin and promoting virtue. Islamic law can be reduced to two words – haram, that which is forbidden, and halal, that which is permitted. Other prominent areas of Shari’a include usury, food and drink, clothing, relationships, personal acts, and penalties for breaking rules.

1. What are commonalities between Shari’a and the Mosaic Law?
2. Why are the penalties for law breaking so severe?
3. What issues make enforcing Shari’a difficult in this century?
4. What are the reasons behind the veiling of Muslim women?

WOMEN IN ISLAM

Early Islam provided for massive improvements in the status of women in virtually all areas of life. In pre-Islam Arabia, women were fully second class, especially lower-tribe females, who were treated as basic chattel. Muhammad allowed women to have rights of inheritance and divorce and to receive a dowry in marriage. From the Western perspective, Islam is not an equal opportunity system. Women must show deference to men and to seek modesty above all else. Muslim women in regressive societies are not allowed to drive or attend university, and marriages continue to be arranged. Men are allowed by Shari’a to have up to four wives; Muslim women are allowed only one spouse. Muslim men are allowed to marry a non-Muslim; Muslim women are not allowed to marry outside their faith.

1. Cite examples of early Islam’s progressive views of women.
2. Why would it be important for the woman to receive a dowry?
3. Discuss reasons many Muslim women wear the veil.
4. Contrast the various differences between marital rights of Muslim men and women.

RELIGION OF PEACE?

Is Islam a peaceful religion or a religion of violence? This question has raged since September 11, 2001. The answer is a qualified yes and no. The Qur’an does cite instructions on violence and war to protect or progress Islam. The Qur’an also teaches a peaceful harmony between Islam and all other religions. The quandary exists primarily due to the use of abrogation, or cancellation, of earlier verses by later ones. Jihad (Arabic for “striving”) has two connotations. Jihad denotes the inner struggle to be pure and the outer struggle to fight for Islam. In the larger sense, Jihad denotes Islam’s call from Allah to bring the world under the dominion of Shari’a. Some choose a peaceful path, while others choose to use violence and terror to achieve this end. Hezbollah, Hamas, al-Qaeda and the P.L.O. are known terrorist organizations that use violence to “spread” Islam.

1. Contrast the differences between Islam’s peaceful beginning in Mecca versus the violent years in Medina.
2. Who are the “People of the Book” and why is it an important distinction?
3. How does Islam’s House of War vs. House of Islam differ from the Christian Great Commission?
4. What are the common goals of Islamic terrorist organizations?

THE FUTURE

In a world with an uncertain future, it is vitally important for Christians to follow the teachings of Jesus. While it is easy to hate and vilify, neither can be justified by Scripture. We must seek dialogue and relationships with Muslims and, in the process, model the honest Way, Truth, and Life. The beginning of successful relationships is always preceded by understanding.

next month:

Reading Groups will be captivated by the geography, people, and lifestyle of the mountains of Kentucky in Silas House’s book, *Clay’s Quilt: A Novel*.