

Missio Dei

Exploring God's work in the world

Understanding Islam

A Christian reflection on the faith
of our Muslim neighbors

Calvin E. Shenk

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Understanding Islam

A Christian reflection on the faith of our Muslim neighbors

Calvin E. Shenk

On Sept. 11, 2001, I was teaching a class on Comparative Monotheisms: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, in the Presidents Room of Eastern Mennonite University Library. The period ended at 10:40 a.m. The first words I heard when exiting the classroom were: "Did you hear what happened in New York and Washington?" In response to the tragedy, classes were canceled for the day, and the campus community gathered in Lehman Auditorium to comfort one another, to reflect, to pray and to sing.

It was predicted that with the demise of communism, Islam would be the next enemy of the West. Since Sept. 11, 2001, it appears that this prediction is becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. I recoil at this prospect.

For the last 40 years, my work through Mennonite mission agencies has brought me in contact with Muslims in Africa and the Middle East. I've listened to Muslim lecturers, I've been treated by a Muslim doctor, I've taught Muslims, I've interacted with Muslim employees and participated in inter-faith dialogue with Jews, Christians and Muslims. I've listened to the Muslim call to prayer at intervals from 4 a.m. until nightfall. I visit mosques.

And, I've known Muslims as friends. On June 9, 1995, I was eating breakfast with Marie, my wife, in our apartment at Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem. Through the window we saw an Israeli soldier running down the steps behind our apartment in pursuit of a Palestinian laborer. The man hobbled to our front door, pressing tightly against it, in a futile attempt to elude the soldier.

When I opened the door, the injured man fell onto the floor and dragged himself into our apartment. The soldier stood in the doorway and trained his rifle on the frightened man. I demanded, "Stop!" and stepped between the soldier and the man he was pursuing.

As the soldier was escorted off the campus by Tantur officials, the injured man, Khalil, looked up at me and said, "You saved my life." When we visited him as he was recuperating at home, we learned that Khalil was a

Muslim and the father of six children. And his name, I discovered, meant “friend.”

Islam invaded our consciousness in a shocking and negative manner on Sept. 11, 2001. In the popular mind, Islam is equated with violence and terror. The worst possible interpretations are given to *jihad* (struggle) and Islamic fundamentalism.

I’ve seen the result of Muslim violence in Jerusalem. On a Sunday morning in March 1996, a Muslim suicide bomber blew up an Israeli bus, killing 19 people. I went to the site after church to empathize with those who remembered the dead by lighting candles and praying. I prayed for peace.

It was the third bombing within a week, killing a total of 50 people. In the recent Israeli-Palestinian conflict, suicide bombings have increased dramatically.

I am deeply troubled when Islam (which derives from *salaam* — Arabic for “peace”) is used to support violence and terror. But I am comforted and reassured by those Muslims who contend that “evil in the name of Allah blasphemes Allah.” In Jerusalem, a Muslim cleric, criticizing suicide bombers, said, “This disgusts me. It is against Islam. It is forbidden to commit suicide in Islam. Suicide is not martyrdom.” Most Muslims are appalled by terrorism. Some accuse terrorists of “hijacking” Islam. The American Muslim Council contends that “there is no cause that justifies this type of immoral and inhuman act that has affected so many innocent lives.”

I’m glad I have not been blamed for all the things the United States has done to Arab Muslims. Shortly after the 1991 Gulf War, Marie and I accompanied an Eastern Mennonite University student group to Jordan. Jordanians repeatedly inquired about our attitude toward the Gulf War, as newspaper correspondents and radio reporters listened intently. We gladly stated our opposition to the war. They welcomed our alternative perspective. We were not personally blamed for the Gulf War.

Likewise, I refuse to blame all Arab Muslims for the events of Sept. 11. I thank God that positive experiences with Muslims keep me from stereotyping, scapegoating or hating Muslims. I want to model and promote kindness, respect, justice and peace toward Muslims.

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I believe that Christians are called to bear witness to the gospel of peace to Muslims. Part of that witness is to understand Islam in its history, theology, practices, distinctions and rapid growth. It is also helpful to note the similarities and differences between Islam and Christian faith and the sensitive issues in our relationship.

Arabian Beliefs and Practices Before Mohammed

Islam officially began with the prophet Mohammed in Arabia in the sixth and seventh centuries after Christ. Islam means to “submit” to God. What was the Arabian religious context to which Mohammed responded?

The great majority of the Arabs worshiped gods and goddesses. There were also lesser spirits, angels and demonic *jinn*. Even though they had a combination of polytheism and local tribal religions, they recognized one supreme God called Allah. But the most obvious characteristic of pre-Islamic religion was animism (the belief that every object, even inanimate ones, contains a spirit). The best example of this was at the city of Mecca. The holiest shrine of Arabia was at Mecca with its meteorite, built into the *Ka'bab* (cube). The Meccans declared that Abraham, while on a visit to his son Ishmael, had built the *Ka'bab* with the Black Stone in it. In addition to being a shrine city, Mecca was an important commercial center.

Mohammed (“Highly Praised”), 571-632 A.D.

Mohammed frequently visited a cave near the base of Mt. Hira, a short distance from Mecca, to meditate and worship. Here in the month of Ramadan about 610 A.D., Mohammed claimed to have received the revelation of the Qur’an from the angel Gabriel. After a period of self-questioning and discouragement, he came to look upon himself as a true prophet and apostle of Allah. Mohammed was illiterate, but after his death the Qur’an (recitation) was collected. This was not Mohammed’s book, it was believed, but Allah’s.

Mohammed preached that there was only one God, and that this God could not be worshiped with idols. This brought persecution upon him from the Meccans. He fled north to Medina (“City of the Prophet”) in 622. This flight is known as the *Hijra* and is the year from which Muslims date

their calendar. The first mosque was constructed at Medina. The first sermon was preached there on a Friday. Mohammed established a theocracy at Medina and then conquered Mecca in order to unite Arabia. Mohammed became a political and religious leader.

Mohammed did not claim to perform miracles, but regarded the Qur'an as a miracle. Though Mohammed theoretically accepted the Scriptures of Jews and Christians, he believed Christians and Jews had misinterpreted their Scriptures and corrupted their religion. His mission was to call people back to the true worship of God. He imitated the Jews in facing Jerusalem to pray and was eager to get their support. But when the Jews refused to hear him, he directed his followers to pray toward Mecca rather than toward Jerusalem.

Mohammed conquered Mecca and from there ruled Arabia. After he subdued Mecca, he dedicated the *Ka'bab* to Allah and ordered the destruction of all the idols.

The fundamentals of the faith as set forth in the Qur'an are not many in number and are within the mental reach of all. The Islamic way of life has little to do with theory and much to do with practice.

Islamic Beliefs and Taboos

The fundamentals of the faith as set forth in the Qur'an are few in number and easily understood. The Islamic way of life has little to do with theory and much to do with practice. Compared to many other religions, Islam spells out the way of life it proposes and gives detailed instructions. The Muslim is not asked to agree, but to submit. ("Islam," itself, means submission.)

1. God (Allah). No statement is more important to a Muslim than "God is one." The greatest sin one can commit is to attribute partners to God. God has 99 names; the 100th one — it is thought — is known by the camel. God is supreme, all-knowing and all-powerful. He is the creator of the world and will bring it to judgment. God is compassionate and merciful, but only to those who submit unquestioningly to his will. The major contribution of Islam to Arabian religion was monotheism. Islam believes that Jews departed from monotheism when they worshiped idols and that Christians compromised monotheism by making Jesus God. The name of God dominates the Qur'an and the speech of Muslims. God reveals his will and guides humans through prophets, angels and holy books.

2. Prophets. The Qur'an mentions the names of 28 prophets. The Great Prophets are Adam (the chosen of Allah), Noah (the preacher of Allah), Abraham (the friend of Allah), Moses (the speaker of Allah, who transmitted the Ten Commandments), Jesus (the word of Allah) and Mohammed (the apostle of Allah). No prophet is equal to Mohammed in knowledge or authority or has received so perfect a revelation. Mohammed is said to be the comforter promised by Jesus. Muslims revere Mohammed, but they do not worship him.

3. Angels. Gabriel is God's chief messenger. He is the one who gave the revelation to Mohammed. The angel Israfil is to sound the trumpet on the day of judgment. Azrafil is the angel of death. All people have two recording angels to write down their good and evil deeds. Munkar and Nakir will examine everyone in the grave after death. The devil (Iblis or Shaitin) is an angel who fell through pride and is now a tempter. He is the head of all the demons and evil *jinn*.

4. Holy books. Islam as a religion of revelation has a high regard for holy books. The Qur'an is regarded as the last in a long series of books and supersedes former revelations. Islam assumes that the scriptures of Jews and Christians were also authentic revelation, but the Old and New Testaments have two defects from which the Qur'an is free. They were revealed at earlier stages of human spiritual development, and in the process of transmission they became partially corrupted, which explains the discrepancies that occasionally appear between their accounts and parallel ones in the Qur'an. For example, they believe Abraham was asked to offer Ishmael as a sacrifice, not Isaac as the Old Testament says. Muslims believe the Qur'an was written from eternity on a tablet in heaven and was sent down from heaven in its original Arabic. Translations into English and other languages are regarded as paraphrases. The Qur'an is four-fifths the length of the New Testament and is divided into 114 chapters (*surahs*).

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5. Resurrection and judgment. Resurrection of the dead is an important theme. After the resurrection, each one's deeds will be weighed in God's balance. The bridge, *Sirat*, must be crossed. True believers will cross easily, but the wicked will fall into hell, which is described as molten metal, boiling liquid, and fire. Paradise has rivers of cool water, fruit and vegetation, fertility, mansions, and gracious attendants.

6. *Jihad*. *Jihad* means "to struggle." According to Islam, there are two kinds of *jihad* — the greater *jihad* is to struggle spiritually with oneself and the lesser *jihad* is to avenge wrongs done to Islam. Sometimes this takes the form of "holy war" or "just war." Similarly, Islamic fundamentalism is of two kinds — to recover Islamic values or to avenge wrongs done to Islam by non-Muslims, even violently if necessary. Sept. 11, 2001, confirms that one interpretation of *jihad* and one interpretation of fundamentalism is violent, even terroristic. Unfortunately, this interpretation often dominates our consciousness.

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In addition to these core beliefs, Muslims have traditionally been expected to abstain from certain taboos, such as gambling, drinking alcohol, and eating pork. Camel flesh is not forbidden. Animals are to be slaughtered according to carefully prescribed ritual. Though not explicitly commanded in the Qur'an, Muslims traditionally circumcise all males in infancy or childhood. Images are forbidden and Muslim painting has only geometric designs. Festivals of the Muslim calendar are very important.

The Five Pillars of Islam

Mohammed said there were five pillars upon which Islam was built: "bearing witness" in the Creed, prayer, almsgiving, fasting during the month of *Ramadan*, and the pilgrimage to Mecca.

1. The Creed. "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is His Prophet." The first part of the Creed announces the principle of monotheism. The second part acknowledges the authority of Mohammed and the book he transmitted.

2. Prayer. Muslims pray five times a day — at dawn, midday, mid-afternoon, at sunset, and as darkness falls. Muslims wash themselves and bow toward Mecca. Muslims say the proudest part of the human being (the face) must touch the earth or floor. Friday is the special day of public prayer for all adult males at the mosque under the leadership of the *imam*.

3. Almsgiving. There are freewill offerings to the poor, needy, debtors, strangers, slaves and beggars. Islam believes that those who have much should help lift the burden of those who are less fortunate.

4. Observance of *Ramadan*. *Ramadan* is the holy month of the Islamic calendar. During this month, Mohammed is said to have received his initial commission as a prophet, and 10 years later he made the *Hijra* (flight) from Mecca to Medina. Since the calendar is lunar, *Ramadan* rotates around the year. During the month of *Ramadan*, from daybreak to the setting of the sun, Muslims may not eat or drink. After sundown, they resume eating and drinking. Fasting for the Muslim teaches self-discipline, compassion, and dependence upon God; it reminds humans how frail they are.

5. Pilgrimage. Once in a lifetime, every Muslim, man or woman, is expected to make a pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca. The basic purpose of the pilgrimage is to heighten the pilgrim's devotion to God and his will.

The Spread of Islam and its Current Varieties

Mohammed unified the Bedouins for the first time in their history. The weakness of the Byzantine and Persian empires, exhausted by years of strife with each other, made Islamic conquest relatively easy. Within a century of the death of Mohammed, Islam conquered Palestine, Persia and Egypt, and swept across North Africa and Spain. In the centuries that followed, Islam penetrated the Middle East, much of Africa, parts of India, China and islands of the Pacific. Islam spread rapidly because of its sense of mission, its universal character and its simplicity.

The only hint of succession that the prophet made before his death was to appoint Abu Bakr to lead the community in prayers. He is the one who

assembled the Qur'an and was regarded as the *caliph* (religious-political leader). The office of the *caliph* brought unity in the history of Islam, but the choice of *caliphs* brought division.

Sunnis. Eighty-five percent of Muslims are Sunnis. They follow the *sunna* (tradition) and are regarded as orthodox. They believe their religion is that taught by Mohammed and the first four orthodox *caliphs* (Abu Bakr, Omar, Uthman and Ali). Within this grouping there are schools of interpretation that vary in their understanding of the place of the Qur'an, the traditions, and human reason.

Shi'ites. The second largest grouping is Shi'ite, which consists of about 14 percent of the modern population. They are found mainly in Iran, Iraq and

Lebanon. They follow Ali, the last of the four *caliphs*, a cousin and son-in-law of Mohammed. They regard his descendants as the true claimants to the caliphate. The anticipation of the *Mahdi* (a messianic figure) developed in this sect.

Many Muslims think Christians understand the Trinity as God, Jesus and Mary. For Muslims, placing associates alongside God is the supreme sin.

Sufis. In Islam the concern for mystical union with God and love for God was expressed by the Sufis. As orthodox Muslim teachers emphasized the formal and legalistic aspects of Islam, Sufis gave emphasis to emotion. Sufi monastic orders were usually centered upon a saint. Under cover of this cult of saints, some aspects of pre-Islamic religion have been retained in Islam.

A Comparison of Christian Faith and Islam

God. Muslims emphasize the oneness of God, which leads them to reject the Trinity. Many Muslims think Christians understand the Trinity as God, Jesus and Mary. For Muslims, placing associates alongside God is the supreme sin. It is not enough to recognize that God is; he must be recognized as God alone. The Qur'an mentions Spirit and Holy Spirit, but in the context of mediating revelation.

It is not merely Allah's existence that Islam proclaims, but his *sole* existence. Islam emphasizes the power and will of God. Islam's preoccupation

with God's power has led some Christians to suggest that Muslims are deterministic or fatalistic. Muslims respond that belief in God as the creator of everything need not lead to fatalism since humans have moral choice and bear responsibility.

Even though Allah is powerful, two of his most important names are "The Compassionate" and "The Merciful." Muslims are told to pray for forgiveness, but forgiveness is usually a reward for well-doing. In Islam, forgiveness is the cancellation of debt; Christians see forgiveness primarily as the restoration of a relationship.

Muslims do not claim assurance of salvation. People will find out if they are forgiven on the Day of Judgment. Compared to the Christian understanding of God, Allah is not a God of love. The love of God is his preference or his liking. His love is rarely mentioned in the Qur'an. He is not said to love the world and nowhere is it said that "God is love." Love is seen in what he does, not in affection. Fellowship between humans and God is not an Islamic idea. The Qur'an never calls God "Father" or "Shepherd." God is merciful, but not redeeming. Humans are servants of God, not sons and daughters of God. The Qur'an avoids language of intimacy between God and humans.

Revelation. Allah has given revelation because humans are forgetful. Revelation is not communication of divine being, but of divine will. It is not a personal self-disclosure. God *sends* revelation rather than *comes*. It is a revelation *from* God, not *of* God. The human task is to remember God, not to explore or understand him. Direction is more important than speculation.

The Qur'an is the word of Allah, not the words of Mohammed. It is a word addressed *to* Mohammed, not the word *of* Mohammed. It is a verbal transmission from heaven, without any human element in it. The revelation is linguistic — in the Arabic language — as well as spiritual.

Christians believe revelation is personal. It is not simply a law, a set of facts, or a history, but the offer of relationship. For Christians, the Bible is a "secondary word" witnessing to Jesus, the "Word made flesh."

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Humans. Islam is the religion of the almightiness of God and of the lowliness of humans. The only response to this great chasm between God and humans is the total surrender of humans to God. The obligation to submit to God is the central and inclusive meaning of existence. If humans choose to be idolaters, they are their own worst enemy because they destroy their own being.

Yet humans are God's ultimate creation. They have dignity and immortality. They are creative servants and companions of God who mediate between God and the world. They are to recognize God as their Lord.

Sin. The Qur'an states that angels prostrated themselves before Adam, but a rebel angel (Iblis or Satan) refused to bow down to Adam and was punished by God. Iblis then sought revenge by giving Adam evil knowledge, which caused Adam to sin. Iblis continues his work of deceiving humans until the Last Judgment.

Humans are not born sinners. They have a clean slate and can do either good or evil. Sin is defined as weakness and ignorance. Because of this, teachers and guides are necessary, but not a savior.

Though Adam sinned through self-will and pride and was expelled from the garden, he was later forgiven. Muslims believe that no change took place in Adam's nature and he was therefore able, after being forgiven, to serve God perfectly (as prophet).

Adam's descendants were not affected by his mistake. Humans are not born sinners. They have a clean slate and can do either good or evil, though evil is admittedly more attractive. Ideally, the human soul can rise by its innate power to attain righteousness. By following the divine will, humans realize their true being. Humans can obey God fully with proper knowledge and encouragement.

Sin is defined as weakness and ignorance. Muslims believe there can be no sin where there is no knowledge, but neglecting knowledge is sin. If weakness and ignorance are the problems, teachers and guides are necessary, but not a savior. Humans can turn and obey if they will. Islam is obviously much more optimistic about human nature than Christian faith. Christians see sin as defiance and rebellion, not weakness and forgetfulness.

In Islam, humans must take responsibility for their errors. Since evil is brought upon humans by their own actions, they cannot expect any help

in the burden they bear. Bad deeds put humans in debt, but good deeds are regarded as credit. Humans must, therefore, do good deeds to cancel out the debt. The true Muslim is one who “performs.” A record is kept of human performance, and the good and bad deeds are balanced at the Judgment. The result of this balance determines eternal destiny. Assurance of salvation is not guaranteed in Islam.

Society. Muslims are extremely concerned about society and human social responsibilities. Mohammed established precedent for this by being both a prophet and politician, uniting faith and society. All human social responsibilities are religious in character. Distinctions between sacred and secular are irrelevant. Muslims do not dichotomize between faith and society, believer and citizen, or doctrine and culture. Religion is performed both in the mosque and in the market. Islam assumes that the true forms of family, state and economy are discernible in the divine will. The Qur’an, the tradition, and Islamic law are the foundation for social understandings. As Islam is optimistic about the perfectibility of human nature, so the Islamic order for human society is optimistic about the possibility of progress and success.

No Muslim is free to abandon Islam. It is even difficult for a Muslim to be a loyal skeptic. Muslims fear challenges to their unitary view of society. The idea of the church as a “called out” group forming a “society within a society” is very problematic for Muslims.

Reasons for the Resurgence of Islam

In the last decade there has been a resurgence of Islam, sometimes in extremist forms. This resurgence arises from multiple factors.

There is a renewed interest in the study of Qur’an. Qur’an is to the Muslim what Jesus is to the Christian. Oral recitation and study are important. The Qur’an is believed to offer resolutions to the problems of life. It enables one to struggle against social injustices and to work for world peace.

Qur’an is to the Muslim what Jesus is to the Christian. It enables one to struggle against social injustices, to work for world peace, and to achieve ideals for a renewed social order.

Emphasis is placed on Islamic community with Medina as the ideal. The Qur'an is said to provide ideals for a renewed social order. Islamic law is foundational to that new order.

Islamic resurgence is in part a reaction against Western domination, including colonialism and neo-colonialism in its numerous forms. Muslims react against the loose morals of Western societies. They resent Christian missionary activities.

Islam is becoming more politically active because of the self-confidence that comes from explosive growth in wealth and economic power due to oil revenues.

Islam is the world's fastest-growing religion. The principal reason for this rapid growth is that one born into a Muslim family is automatically a Muslim. This is biological growth. But Islam also believes in mission (*dawab*). Why are people not born Muslim attracted to Islam?

Many Americans ask, "Why are some Muslims angry at the United States? What have Americans done to elicit this level of hatred and desperate actions?"

Monotheism is attractive to those who come from clan backgrounds where each clan worships a particular deity. Islam emphasizes a universal, nondiscriminating community and pillars of faith and practice that reinforce community. Islam is optimistic about human nature. Since the human problem is seen as ignorance and mistake rather than rebellion or sin, no mediator is necessary; one can be righteous with appropriate self-effort.

Muslims are self-confident. Islam suggests that there were three camel caravans that set out to cross the desert. Judaism was able to partially cross the desert; Christianity made more progress than Judaism in crossing the desert; but only Islam got the whole way across. Muslims regard Islam not as one religion among many, but as *the* religion.

Muslims also emphasize integration of all of life — economic, social, political and religious. Mohammed was, after all, both a prophet and a politician. Islam speaks not only of spiritual principles, but also of specific laws and behaviors. Many are attracted to the ethics and values of Islam in contrast to the permissiveness of many Western societies. The simplicity of Islamic beliefs and the five pillars of Islam are within the reach of all.

Finally, Islam's claim to be the final revelation and its ideal of the oneness of all Muslims, symbolized by praying toward Mecca and making pilgrimage to Mecca, makes Islam attractive to many seekers.

Muslim Difficulties with Christian Faith

Muslim objections to Christian faith are historical and theological. Historically, Muslims remember the Crusades, colonialism and neo-colonialism. In the events since Sept. 11, 2001, many Americans ask, “Why are some Muslims angry at the United States? What have Americans done to elicit this level of hatred and desperate actions?” If one listens carefully, one hears the United States being blamed for supporting Israel, thereby displacing Palestinians. Israel is a particular problem because Israel occupies Jerusalem, the third most holy site for Islam (after Mecca and Medina). Muslims also remember the 1991 Gulf War and subsequent events — 200,000 killed in the war, and 500,000 deaths since the war because of the embargo. Further, many Muslims are unhappy that U.S. troops are in Saudi Arabia since 1991, where the holy sites of Mecca and Medina are located (even if the royal family permits their presence).

Theologically, Muslims have difficulty with a Trinitarian understanding of God, Jesus as Son of God, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, the Christian belief that Jesus is the final revelation, and the Christian acceptance of four gospels, which from a Muslim point of view is a clear indication that the one gospel (*Injil*) has been corrupted. Muslims also have difficulty with the concept of the church being a “called-out” body of believers rather than forming a union of religion and state.

Similarities Between Islam and Christian Faith

There is much that Christians and Muslims can agree on, at least at one level. These are points of contact and bridges for understanding. Both religions accept a supreme personal God. Both claim to be “people of the book” who believe in revelation. Both speak of mission to those who don’t believe. Christians and Muslims believe in angels, prophets, Satan, community, law and ethics, and worship (prayer, fasting, almsgiving). Christians and Muslims both emphasize stewardship of God’s creation. Exploring similarities as well as differences in faith and practice is an essential Christian and Muslim task.

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Crucial Theological Issues in Christian-Muslim Conversation

For Christians and Muslims there is clearly agreement and disagreement in theology and practice. It is important to identify parallels, omissions and denials in beliefs; but it is also crucial to understand how we use language and how we understand truth.

Is truth best embodied in law or person? How do we understand the oneness of God and Trinity? Christians will want to emphasize the loving character of God as parent. Does God suffer, or is God only powerful? What is the meaning of Gethsemane? Christians find hope in the claim that Christ died while we were yet sinners. Christians insist that we are sons and daughters of God, not just servants.

Christians and Muslims both speak of the Garden of Eden, but what happened there? Christians speak of the fall; Muslims speak of forgetfulness. Muslims emphasize sin as deed; Christians speak of sin as condition.

Christians ask whether God is revealed only in a book, or also in a person. How does God communicate to humans? Is God distant or hidden? Does God come, or is God's will and guidance sent down? Is revelation mainly word or personality? Muslims accept Jesus (Isa) as a prophet. How is Jesus prophet? Is Jesus more than a prophet?

Muslims stumble over the term "Son of God." What Muslims understand by the term "Son of God" and what Christians believe about "Son of God" are in disagreement. Perhaps in Islamic contexts it would be preferable for Christians to speak of Jesus as "Immanuel" (God with us). The Qur'an calls Jesus "Son of Mary," "Servant of God" and "Word." Muslims believe Jesus is a word *from* God, not the word *of* God. Though Muslims believe in the virgin birth of Jesus, they do not believe this makes Jesus divine. Some Muslims believe that Jesus will return to earth and will declare that all should become Muslim.

Christians and Muslims should engage in conversation about human nature and the human problem. Both speak of the Garden of Eden, but what happened in the Garden of Eden? Christians speak of the fall; Muslims speak of forgetfulness. Muslims talk of human mistake; Christians emphasize rebellion and perverseness. Muslims emphasize sin as deed; Christians speak of sin as condition. Islam places more blame on Satan than on humans. Consequently, Muslims are more optimistic

about the human condition than Christians are. Because Christians are more pessimistic about human nature, they emphasize redemption or atonement, whereas Muslims speak of guidance. Muslims believe “mercy is nigh to all them who do well;” Christians insist that “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

For Muslims, the ideal community is Medina. For Christians, the ideal community is the church in Jerusalem (Acts 2). Muslims do not distinguish between religion and politics and give more emphasis to success and power in community. The ideal Christian community tends to be more relational and vulnerable. Christians place more emphasis on the voluntary character of community. Both Muslims and Christians emphasize ethics. Christians remember the admonition to “be holy as God is holy,” but also discover the need for grace because of their unfaithfulness.

Sensitive Issues Between Muslims and Christians

Christians need to discern what is “offense of the cross” and what is “cultural offense.” Christians are sometimes asked how we regard the Qur’an. Can we respect the Qur’an insofar as it is not in conflict with what we consider normative revelation in Christ and Scripture? Similarly, we are often asked about our attitude toward Mohammed. Can we respect Mohammed as a prophet of his day who taught monotheism and value that which is not in contradiction to the normative revelation of Jesus Christ?

During the Gulf War, Western Christians debated whether Allah (whom Muslims worship) is the same God that Christians worship. Perhaps a prior question should probe how Allah is understood in the minds of worshipers. If Christians reply that Allah is not the same God, we seem to suggest to Muslims that we are not monotheists. A more important question, I believe, is how we understand Allah. When I asked one of my students, a former Muslim who had become a Christian, why he became a Christian, he replied, “The God I knew as Allah came close in Jesus.” He and many Arab Christians refer to the God of our Lord Jesus Christ by the Arabic word Allah, but with a new understanding of Allah.

Christian Witness to Muslims

In Egypt, on one of the student tours Marie and I led, traveling on a bus through Cairo, one student observed the masses of people and asked, “What is God going to do with all these Muslims?” That is an important question. But an equally important question might be, “What is our Christian responsibility in bearing witness to Muslims?” How can this be done with understanding and sensitivity?

There is often misunderstanding between Christians and Muslims, both theological and relational. Christians must seek better understanding. We need to clarify what Islam teaches and also seek relationships with

When I asked one of my students, a former Muslim who had become a Christian, why he became a Christian, he replied, “The God I knew as Allah came close in Jesus.”

Muslims as people. We must guard against bearing false witness about Muslims, remembering that a lie in defense of the truth is still a lie. We must describe Islam in such a way that Muslims can recognize themselves. Roelf Kuitse, a Dutch Mennonite specialist in Islam, has suggested that “suspicion is lived away, not talked away.”

Witness is an invitation to look again at Jesus. We witness from joy and love. We are not the ones who dispense salvation. Lesslie Newbigin reminds us that “we are on the witness stand,” not on the “judgment seat.” A Christian friend of mine who lived in Egypt said, “I witness, then let the Holy Spirit do the work.” Our task is to present “news” of the gospel more than “views” of religion. What we imply by our behavior and attitude in witness is as important as what we say. We are called to regard Muslims as friends, not enemies.

As a student at the Nazareth Bible Academy in Ethiopia in the 1960s, one of my dear friends, Kelifa Ali, from an Islamic background, publicly acknowledged his faith in Jesus. Kelifa became a church worker and leader.

During the Marxist period in Ethiopia, he was imprisoned for four years. Upon his release, he did not hesitate to again assume leadership in the church. Suffering from cancer, Kelifa traveled to the United States for treatment. His favorite phrase became “He is faithful.” This phrase is on his tombstone at Lindale Mennonite Church in Harrisonburg, Va. Kelifa wit-

nessed faithfully to Jesus and to Christian discipleship. In the same way, it is my hope that understanding Islam more fully will prompt followers of Jesus to more faithful Christlike witness to their Muslim brothers and sisters who today make up nearly a quarter of the world God so dearly loves.

Islam: A Few Facts

- Islam is nearly 14 centuries old. A few highlights of this history include:
 - 570** Birth of Mohammed
 - 610** Mohammed claims he has been shown many messages concerning life from the angel Gabriel, God's messenger.
 - 622** Mohammed's preaching engenders opposition and he flees from Mecca to Medina, the "City of the Prophet." This flight marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. From Medina, Mohammed issues a holy war against Mecca.
 - 630** Mohammed's followers conquer Mecca. Pilgrimage to Mecca becomes important religious practice.
 - 632** Death of Mohammed
 - 7th-8th century** Islam spreads throughout Arabia, Egypt, Palestine and Syria (632-634), Mesopotamia and Persia (634-644), Iran and North Africa (644-656), and reaches Europe (714).
 - 1095** Pope Urban II preaches the Crusade to Jerusalem, a war to conquer the Holy Land from the Muslims. The following year sees the First Crusade, resulting in the conquest of Jerusalem in 1099.
- Islam is today the world's second-largest religion, with an estimated 1.2 billion Muslims worldwide.
- Although many associate Islam with the Middle East, only 20 percent of Muslims live in the Arabic-speaking world. Most live east of Pakistan, with Indonesia claiming the world's largest Muslim population.
- An estimated 7 million Muslims — 2 percent of the population — live in the United States, practicing their faith in almost 2,000 mosques, Islamic schools and centers.
- Only a quarter of U.S. Muslims are of Arab descent. Thirty-three percent are south-central Asian and 30 percent are African-American.
- States with the highest percentage of Muslim population are California, Illinois, Ohio, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New York and Rhode Island.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What personal experiences, if any, have you had with people of Islamic faith? Neighbor? Relative? Work colleague? Travel encounter?
2. What sources have most contributed to your understanding of Islam? Childhood impressions? Personal friendships? Research project? Media reports? Reading? Life encounter? Hearsay? Other?
3. Do you think the events of Sept. 11, 2001, have altered in any way your views and understandings? How so?
4. What surprised you most in reading this booklet? What made you stop and ponder? What convinced you of the need to expand your awareness by becoming better informed?
5. How would you summarize the key beliefs and practices of Islam? (See “six beliefs” and “five pillars” on pages 4-7).
6. Calvin Shenk states that “there is much that Christians and Muslims can agree on,” and that “exploring similarities as well as differences in faith and practices is an essential Christian and Muslim task.” Do you agree? What do you understand to be the principal “similarities” and “differences” that exist between the Christian faith and Islam?
7. Shenk reports that one of his Muslim friends became a Christian because the God he knew as Allah “came close in Jesus.” Based on your understanding of Islam, why might this be true? What possible key could this hold for future conversations you may have with Muslims?
8. Christians have often separated “evangelism” from “bearing witness to Christ’s way of peace.” How might these two themes come together in conversations with people of Islamic faith?
9. What effect, if any, will the current “war on terrorism” have on the church’s capacity to engage Muslims in conversations about faith? One evangelical spokesperson, Tony Campolo, has stated recently that this conflict has pushed Christian witness to Muslims back a thousand years. To what historical event is he referring? Do you agree with his assessment? How important is it for today’s church to either align itself with or distance itself from current military and political operations “for the sake of the gospel?”

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The *Missio Dei* Series

- No. 1 *Calvin E. Shenk, Understanding Islam: A Christian reflection on the faith of our Muslim neighbors (2002).*

Understanding Islam:

A Christian reflection on the faith
of our Muslim neighbors

Calvin E. Shenk

“It was predicted that with the demise of communism, Islam would be the next enemy of the West,” writes Calvin E. Shenk. “Since Sept. 11, 2001, it appears that this prediction is becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. I recoil at this prospect.”

It is with these words that author Shenk sets the tone for this booklet. Shenk’s reflections could not be better timed or more needed than they are today. Faced with the horrific spectacle of the World Trade Center calamity, people everywhere — including many Christians — are scrambling to gain a clearer understanding of Islam, today’s second-largest religion.

The author is well-placed to respond to some of the questions people are asking. For the past 40 years, he and his wife, Marie, have cultivated relationships with Muslims in Africa and the Middle East: visited mosques, listened to Muslim lectures, received medical treatment by a Muslim doctor, interacted with Muslim employees and, as committed Christians, engaged with Muslims in interfaith conversations.

“There is much that Christians and Muslims can agree on,” writes Shenk. “Exploring similarities as well as differences in faith and practice is an essential Christian and Muslim task.” It is this task that Shenk, with great care and respect, models for us in these pages. “Christians must seek better understanding,” he writes. “We are called to regard Muslims as friends, not enemies.”

Calvin E. Shenk and his wife, Marie, served for many years in Jerusalem, with a focus on Jewish-Christian relationships. Their work was jointly sponsored by Mennonite Board of Missions, Mennonite Central Committee, and Eastern Mennonite Missions. The Shenks attempted to foster greater understanding of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity through writing and teaching, and to interpret the Middle East situation to church groups and other interested audiences. In addition, Shenk has for many years taught courses as professor of religion at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Va.



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