

“CHRISTIANITY & WORLD RELIGIONS (#4): ISLAM”

(Genesis 21:9, 11-13)

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–I–

1.. [BOTH Services:] Read Text (9:30am MSG; 11am NRSV): Genesis 21:9, 11-13 and Pray.

2. Today as we continue our series Christianity and World Religions, we come to what is probably the most important of all faiths to learn about besides our own: **ISLAM**.<sup>1</sup>

A–And I say this because I believe that if there’s to be any meaningful peace in our world today, it’ll only come about when Christians and Muslims (who *together* make up nearly 2/3 of the world’s population) can learn to better understand and respect one another.

B–In your bulletin, you’ll find a set of sermon notes that I invite you to follow along with as we explore the origins & beliefs of Islam, along with how these compare with Christianity.

3. So, let’s jump right in by briefly exploring the **ORIGINS OF ISLAM**, which in fact we find in today’s scripture reading from Genesis 21.<sup>2</sup>

A–Like Christians and Jews, Muslims also trace their *spiritual roots back to Abraham* – the difference being that *their* lineage comes through the son *Ishmael*, instead of *Isaac*.<sup>3</sup>

1–Do you remember what Verses 12-13 say God told Abraham? (MSG) “*Don’t feel badly about the boy (Ishmael)... because I’ll also develop a great nation from him – he’s your son, too.*” (NRSV) “*Do not be distressed because of the boy (Ishmael)... for I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.*”

2–In other words, our own Old Testament (the Jewish *Torah*) attests to the divine origins and blessing of God on the Muslim people (*Let’s remember that the next time we’re inclined to talk bad about our Muslim cousins!*)

B–And yet, while Abraham and Ishmael represents Islam’s *spiritual* heritage, its **history** as a separate religion doesn’t begin until the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD with the life of a man named **Muhammad**.<sup>4</sup>

1–He grew up in the town of Mecca (in what is now Saudia Arabia), a place where people of many nations came to worship all kinds of pagan gods... *except for* the Jews and Christians, who believed there was only *one* God – Muhammad was drawn to this, and soon became troubled by the worship of these other idols.

2–And so, the story goes that at age 40, he went to a cave overlooking Mecca to pray for guidance,<sup>5</sup> and that there the angel Gabriel appeared to him in a vision, and over the next 23 years revealed direct, literal messages from God to humanity.

3–Each time, Muhammad came back & shared these revelations, which his followers eventually compiled into what is now known as the *Qur'an*<sup>6</sup> – Islam’s sacred book.

4–And yet, these messages calling all people to worship the one God (which in Arabic is the word *Allah*<sup>7</sup>) resulted in numerous threats on Muhammad’s life.

5–So, in the summer of 622 AD, he accepted an invitation from the nearby town of Medina to come be their leader. And there he set up the first Islamic state, with worship of the one God/Allah as the centerpiece – all Muslims count time from this event (known as the *Hijrah*<sup>8</sup>).

6–The rest of Muhammad’s life was spent consolidating his political and spiritual rule not only in Medina, also leading an army and conquering the Arabian peninsula (including Mecca), establishing the worship of Allah as the only God.

C–Today there are nearly 1.5 billion Muslims practicing their faith in two major branches (Sunni and Shi’a),<sup>9</sup> making Islam the second largest religion in the world (and the fastest growing of the five religions we’re studying in this series).

D–Before we continue, I want to offer *two words of caution*:

1– First, we need to be careful to distinguish between nations and cultures shaped by or *around* Islam... and the *religion* of Islam itself – they’re related, but *different*.

2–Second, we need to also distinguish between the beliefs & practices of *mainstream* Islam... and those of *radical* Islam.

(a) If it helps, think of extremist groups like Al Qaeda being to Islam what the KKK & followers of David Koresh are to Christianity –twisted/warped versions of their own faith who use terror/violence to achieve their goals.

(b) So, just as we don’t judge all Christians by the actions of the KKK, we shouldn’t judge all Muslims by the work these extremist groups, either.<sup>10</sup>

4. So then, what *are* some of the **BASIC BELIEFS** of Islam? Let me mention several that are outlined in the *Qur'an*.<sup>11</sup>

A–First and foremost is the concept of absolute *submission / obedience to Allah*, the *one* God (and, I might add, the *same* God that we Christians worship, as well!<sup>12</sup>) – in fact, the word “*Islam*” literally means “*submission*,” and a “*Muslim*” is merely “*one who submits... to the will and worship of Allah*.”<sup>13</sup>

B–And the *way* one accomplishes this submission/obedience is by following what’s known as the “**Five Pillars of Islam**”:<sup>14</sup>

1–The first is the *Shahadah* (or “*declaration of faith*”) which says “*There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His prophet*” – it’s a simple declaration that all Muslims must first speak, and then live by to be truly faithful.<sup>15</sup>

2–Second is *Salat* (prayer) – all Muslims are required to pray prayers to God five specific times each day, kneeling and bowing in the direction of Mecca.<sup>16</sup>

*(This past Friday, I was privileged to attend the afternoon prayer service at the East Cobb Islamic Center not 1 mile from here on Braswell Rd. The people there were gracious and hospitable, and took time with me afterward to answer my questions and talk with me about their understanding of faith – I only hope that they’d feel as welcomed if visiting our church as I did).*<sup>17</sup>

3–Third is *Zakat* (almsgiving), where Muslims show their love for God by giving at least 2.5% of their income each year to the poor and needy around them.<sup>18</sup>

4–Fourth is *Sawm* (fasting), which refers to the fact that during the holy month of *Ramadan*,<sup>19</sup> Muslims must abstain from food, drink, and sex until sunset each day, the purpose being to focus our attention *on God*, rather than the things of the world.

5–And the fifth “Pillar” is *Hajj* (pilgrimage), where all Muslims are required to travel to Mecca at least once in their lifetime if financially possible.<sup>20</sup>

5. So how, then, is all of this **DIFFERENT FROM CHRISTIANITY**?<sup>21</sup> Well, I could talk about several– like *how we believe God speaks and relates to humans*, and of course our *differing perspectives on the role/place of Jesus* – read about these in my endnotes & blog.<sup>22</sup>

–II–

6. For the sake of time, however, I just want us focus on *one* difference involving ***the nature of salvation and how we achieve it.***

A–Consider the fact that in Islam, “salvation” essentially refers to the *overcoming of idolatry* in life (e.g., our tendency as humans to worship things that are not God).

1–And the solution (they would say) is found in our own radical submission and obedience to the worship of God through the “Five Pillars” of Islamic faith.

2–Listen to the words of God in the *Qur’an*: “*The Truth has come to you from your Lord. Whoever follows the right path follows it for his own good, and whoever strays does so to his own loss: I am not your guardian*” (Surah 10:108).

3–In other words: God commands us to put Him first; He gives us a path to help us do that (the “5 Pillars”); so we’re then expected to “just do it”! And if we don’t, then we’re held accountable before God on what’s called “the Day of Judgement.”

B–Now, we Christians would agree that we humans have a problem with idolatry (that we tend to worship people/things that aren’t God). And we also agree that the solution lies in finding a way to submit ourselves to God (we sometimes call it “*surrender*”).

1–But the *way* we surrender ourselves (and our motivation for doing so) is *very different* – E.G., “salvation” for us is not so much about *obedience* to a path set down by a transcendent, powerful deity (which we *do* believe God *is*), but that it’s instead a *loving response* to the initiative of an intimate, *loving* parent.

2–And we’d say that this kind of salvation is what God showed and offered us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – Ephesians 2:8 says: “*By grace you have been saved through faith. This is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.*”

3–You see, we believe that Jesus demonstrated that the way to overcome idolatry, sin, evil and violence is not by asking (or forcing) others to be *obedient* to any kind of set path (like the “Five Pillars”), but simply by *loving* others (including our enemies and those who hate us).<sup>23</sup>

4–Now, we believe in obedience to God, too – but the difference is that we believe obedience is a *response* to God’s love, not a *pre-condition* for it.<sup>24</sup>

7. I will say, though, that despite our differences, I was surprised to discover the *vast* number of ways that we Christians not only **AGREE WITH OUR MUSLIM COUSINS**, but also share their deep convictions about God and life.

A–Things you can again read about in my blog or today’s endnotes like *their wholehearted devotion to God*, and *the priority they place on generosity*<sup>25</sup> – but let me just focus on one that was especially prominent to me: ***their commitment to prayer.***

B–Most of us may already know that faithful Muslims stop whatever they’re doing five times a day to pray – at sunrise, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and before bed – it’s *salat*, the second “Pillar of Islam.”

C–Well, I can’t help but wonder that if we Christians would only pray this diligently even just *once* a day (or at least more than *once/week*), I think we’d be different people, and our world would be different, too.

–III–

8. Now, I’ve shared a lot of things today. But for me, the bottom line revolves around this question: “***How should we Christians relate to & share faith with our Muslim neighbors?***”

A–You know, we can relate to them like some have done throughout history (including many misguided Christians): by arguing with them; by being afraid of them<sup>26</sup>; by judging all of them by their “bad apples”; and even by simply avoiding them.

B–But I believe that the *best* way (the way of Jesus) is by reaching out and *loving* them – asking God to give us hearts of love and compassion (not judgment) for them.

C–After all, we’ll never convince them of the true meaning and significance of Jesus Christ until they first *see and experience* his love *through* us.

1–In 2 Corinthians 5:20, Paul says that “*We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making His appeal through us.*”

2–The question is: *What kind of ambassador are you, especially to our Muslim cousins?*

9. [PRAYER: “O God, we thank you for the deep faith and commitment of our Muslim friends, and for the things we learn from them about our own faith in you: the value of surrendering ourselves wholly to you; the priority they place on sharing faith; their focus on the sovereignty of your greatness; and their commitment to spiritual disciplines like prayer, fasting, and generosity. But we also thank you that in Jesus, you’ve shown us that you are a God who longs to relate to us intimately, as well – that we can call you ‘Abba/Father,’ and that way of love is always more desired than the way of obedience. We thank you that our salvation isn’t dependent on our compliance with a set of commands, but on our trust and faith in you as Savior and Lord. Teach us to be people of love in how we treat and share faith with others (especially our Muslim cousins), and help us follow the path of submission that leads us to your cross. In the name of the Jesus, your one and only Son and our Savior, Amen.”]

### **ENDNOTES:**

1. Please remember that the purpose of this series is not to learn *all* there is to know about the five faiths we’re discussing, but merely to provide some handles for us to better understand these and be better equipped to dialogue and share our faith with those who practice them. The content of this sermon, therefore, is admittedly neither comprehensive nor exhaustive in terms of its approach to Islam.
2. Learn more about the origins and development of Islam from the following sources: Lewis M. Hopfe, World Religions (Growing Christians Series) (Nashville: Graded Press, 1987), Chapters 12-13, pp.106-121; Paul Stroble, What Do Other Faiths Believe? A Study of World Religions (FaithQuestions Series) (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2003), pp. 38-39; Sean O’Callaghan, The Compact Guide to World Religions (Oxford, England: Lion Books, 2010), pp. 55-59; Adam Hamilton, Christianity and World Religions: Wrestling with Questions People Ask (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), pp. 67-87; and Fritz Redenhour, So What’s The Difference? (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1976), pp.65-72.
3. Ishmael was the brother of Isaac, and was conceived by Abraham’s servant Hagar.
4. Sometimes his name is spelled “Mohammed.” He lived from 570-632 AD, and is considered to be the historical founder of Islam.
5. Part of this search for guidance, it’s believed, was also brought about by the many kinds of tragedy that marked Muhammad’s early life: the death of his parents and grandparents at a young age; the death of both of his sons; and (later) the death of his beloved wife Khadija.
6. Sometimes spelled *Koran*.
7. The literal Arabic word is “Al Illah” (“the God”) which is most usually condensed to “Allah.”
8. Also spelled *Hijra*, *Hijrat*, and *Hegira*.
9. The *Sunni* (or *Sunna*) comprise about 85% of all Muslims, and are the more “liberal” branch of Islam. The *Shi’a*, (or *Shi’ite*) comprise around 14% of all Muslims, and are the more “orthodox/conservative” of the two. In addition to the differences in how they *practice* of Islam, the *Sunni* and *Shi’a* branches differ in their understanding of who should be Muhammad’s successor(s). Read a bit about the difference between these two branches in Sean O’Callaghan, World Religions, pp. 58-59, and also in Lewis M. Hopfe, World Religions, pp.119-121.
10. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that warfare and violence are a historic part of the Muslim tradition, and are clearly attested to in the *Qur’an*. However, to be fair, some of this is also cultural – it is a reaction (continuing hundreds of years later) to the violence and warfare perpetrated *against* them by Christians during the medieval Crusades.

11. The *Qur'an* (literally “*reading/recitation*”) is believed to be **the literal words Allah** recited directly to Muhammad, and shared as the way for humanity to accomplish “submission” to Allah – to help humanity achieve conformity and obedience to God’s will. It’s words regulate both individual and collective behavior, as it contains no separation between “secular” and “sacred” as in Western culture. It focuses strongly on the mercy of God, the concept of divine forgiveness, and on the importance of both personal and social justice. For Muslims, the *Qur'an* is only the *Qur'an* if it is in Arabic.

It should be pointed out that in addition to the *Qur'an*, there are **several other types of sacred writings in Islam** (several of which are shared in common with Judaism and Christianity): the *Torah* (*Tawrat*) of Moses; the *Psalms* (*Zabur*) of David; what we would say is a modified version of the *Gospel* (or *Injil*) of Jesus; and there is also the *Hadith* (a collection of Muhammad’s teachings shared with his friends, though not as important as the *Qur'an*). Above all of these, however, is the authority of the *Qur'an*.

12. When Muhammad talked about “*Allah*,” he was referring to the God of Abraham and the God of Jesus. “*Allah*” is merely the Arabic word for “God” in the same way that “Dios” is the Spanish word. In fact, even today Christians in predominantly Muslim, Arabic-speaking countries call God “Allah” too. So, the “Allah” of Islam is the same “God” of both Judaism and Christianity – He’s NOT some other “god.”

13. The root of the word “Islam” is “*slm*” – in Hebrew this word is “*shalom*,” referring to the kind of peace that occurs when people live in harmony with God’s will and with each other. However, it can also mean “*submission*” or “*surrender*” (i.e., to the will and purpose of God/Allah) Therefore, “Islam” is the religion of submission or surrender to Allah, and a “Muslim” is one who is submitted to the will and purpose of Allah (Read generally Adam Hamilton, *Christianity and World Religions*, p. 73).

14. For an overview of these “Five Pillars,” read generally Sean O’Callaghan, *World Religions*, pp. 64-65; Lewis M. Hopfe, *World Religions*, pp. 116-117; Paul Stroble, *What Do Other Faiths Believe?*, p.41; Fritz Ridenour, *So What’s the Difference?*, pp.68-69; and Adam Hamilton, *Christianity and World Religions*, pp. 75-77. Also, there are two additional belief practices that often cause confusion in our Western culture which time will not permit me to address:

(1) **the term *jihad*** – often understood to refer to a literal, military “holy war/crusade.” It *has* been used this way in many political situations. However, in Islam the *religion*, *jihad* more properly refers to the *internal* struggle to overcome our own weaknesses of faith that may lead us to be disobedient to God. It is, in fact, a “holy war” (an *jihad akbar* – “*greater struggle*”) against our own lower nature as we struggle spiritually and morally to grow closer to God. (Read Stroble, *What Do Other Faiths Believe?*, pp. 41-42).

(2) **The role of women** in Islam is also misunderstood. Much of the way women are treated (some would say “oppressed”) has to do with the *culture* of Islamic nations, rather than the religion itself. What’s more is that from a Muslim perspective (include the perspective of Muslim women), women are not oppressed but actually revered and honored – they would point out that the boundaries and rules regarding women were set up in Muhammad’s day to actually *elevate* the women of their society, which *were* oppressed by the pre-Muslim leaders of those communities. They would say that Muhammad in his day – and the Islamic religion in general today – actually *raises* the status women.

15. Neither Muhammad nor his followers claim Muhammad to be divine, but merely a mortal man through whom Allah chose to directly speak to humanity. Muhammad is understood to be a man that God spoke through in much the same way that Christians and Jews view Moses’ encounter with God at Mt. Sinai in the Bible. For Muslims, Muhammad is seen as the last (and most important) in a line of “prophets/messengers” to humanity that included recognizable biblical figures like Moses, Jonah, and even Jesus.

16. These five times are sunrise, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and evening, and in some Muslim communities men (called *muezzins*) climb to the top of tall, slender towers (called *minarets*) and call out that it’s time for prayer.

17. Learn more about them at their website: [www.ec-ic.org/drupal](http://www.ec-ic.org/drupal). I should point out that while we often refer to Muslim places of worship as “Mosques,” the Arabic word for them is *Masjid*, with worship and

prayer being led not by a pastor, priest, or rabbi, but by an *imam* (prayer leader and teacher).

18. This is not simply an act of charity, but a requirement – not merely a financial obligation or act, but primarily a spiritual one (with which we Christians would agree). It's a reflection of the attitude of our heart and reveals our attitude towards money and material wealth as it relates to the things of God.

19. Although Ramadan begins the same day every year on the Islamic calendar, it's date varies significantly from year to year on our Western (Gregorian) calendar. This is because the Gregorian calendar is based on a solar year, and the Islamic calendar is based on a lunar one. So, for example, this year (2011), the Muslim month of Ramadan occurs essentially during August, by 2020 Ramadan will occur during April-May.

20. While the journey is a remembrance of Abraham, Ishmael, and Hagar (who supposedly founded the city), it also symbolically represents the believer's journey through life. By Islamic tradition, Abraham and Ishmael built the *Ka'ba* at Mecca, a large cube that became the center for pilgrimage there and a reminder of devotion to the one God/Allah.

21. For a very *brief* overview, you might find it helpful to read the brochure "*Basic Facts About Islam*" that can be downloaded from my blog ([www.pastorbriang.blogspot.com](http://www.pastorbriang.blogspot.com)) and click on the link in the "*Christianity and World Religions*" section to the right).

22. Here's a bit more about each of these differences (you'll find a summary of these on my February 14, 2011 blog at [www.pastorbriang.blogspot.com](http://www.pastorbriang.blogspot.com)):

(#1) **God's relationship to humans** – In Islam, Allah is a personal being (as in Christianity) who is best understood and related to as a "Sovereign Lord." Yet, this is the extent of how He is known and related to. As an example, the *Qur'an* itself begins with these words: "*Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds; Most Gracious, Most Merciful; Master of the Day of Judgment. You do we worship, and we seek your aid*" (*Sura 1:2*). Some of Islam's other sacred writings actually lists 99 "beautiful names of God." They are all positive, loving names, but they all are preceded by the definite article "*The*" and therefore emphasize the supremacy, majesty, and "transcendence" of God (Read generally Paul Stroble, *What Do Other Faiths Believe?*, pp. 34-35).

In Christianity, God is definitely understood to be a transcendent, sovereign Lord of all, as well. But we add that He is also what's called "immanent" – He can be related to intimately. Jesus teaches that we're invited to call God "*Abba/Father/Daddy*" (For some examples, read Matthew 6:9; Luke 11:2; Mark 14:36; Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6; and many others). Muslims would not call God "Father/Abba" – it is too informal and intimate.

(#2) **How God speaks to humanity** – Muslims believe that God spoke directly to humanity by way of an angel speaking for God definitively to Muhammad through the words of the *Qur'an*. We Christians, on the other hand, believe that when God wanted to speak a final, definitive word, it didn't come through an angel or prophet. Instead, God Himself "*became flesh and lived among us*" (John 1:14), and that because God became a human being, He could speak to us in our own language.

This is why the equivalent of the *Qur'an* in Christianity is NOT the Bible, but Jesus himself – to Christians, Jesus is God's Word incarnate; for Muslims, that is what the *Qur'an* is. As Adam Hamilton writes, "*The Qur'an is to Islam what Jesus is to Christianity: it is thought to be God's definitive and final revelation*" (Hamilton, p. 74). Our Bible contains words, stories, poems and letters about God that we believe were *inspired by* God, but nevertheless *written by* humans. By contrast, the *Qur'an* is written in first person – as if God is speaking directly to Muhammad (who could neither read nor write). Muslims therefore believe God worked a miracle to enable him to share the actual, literal words of God to humans.

This also explains why Christians and Muslims disagree about the relative authority of both the *Qur'an* and the Bible. Muslims believe that wherever the *Qur'an* and the Christian Gospels disagree, it is the Gospels that are wrong. We would say the same about the *Qur'an*. After all, we would argue, how can a document (the Bible) which records events from many first-hand eye witnesses (even if recorded 100 years later) be *less accurate* about the life of Jesus than a recitation of these same events shared via a trance-vision to *one man* 500 years later?

(#3) **The place and role of Jesus in faith** – In Islam, Allah spoke through a number of people considered to be prophets or “messengers” over the centuries, including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. However, though Jesus was a prophet, Muslims deny that he was the son of God. They believe that it was someone else who died on the cross (perhaps Judas, mistaken to be Jesus). They also claim that Christians have changed the scriptures, and that Jesus did not come to die for the sins of the world. Instead, in Islam God forgives us of sin and counts good deeds in our favor, but we don’t need someone to die for us (Read generally Fritz Ridenour, So What’s the Difference?, pp. 69-71. Read also Hamilton, Christianity and World Religions, p. 83).

23. For example, read Matthew 5:44 and Luke 6:27-35. It’s true that we Christians *do* believe in obedience to God, as well, but not in the same way or to the same degree as our Muslim cousins. For us, obedience to God grows out of *love*, not out of *submission/obedience* – it’s a *response* to love, not a *precondition* to it.

24. For more about this difference, read generally Fritz Ridenour, So What’s the Difference?, pp. 70-71.

25. Here’s a bit more about these points of commonality (you’ll find a summary of these on my February 14, 2011 blog at [www.pastorbriang.blogspot.com](http://www.pastorbriang.blogspot.com)):

(#1) **Wholehearted submission to God** – the Muslims that I know are deeply committed to following the will and ways of Allah in ways that often put us Christians to shame. In contrast to what often seems to be our tendency towards shallow, superficial faith, they are radically sold out to God – if more Christians could capture that kind of wholehearted passion for God, it would transform the world with *love*.

(#2) **The priority they place on generosity** –Remember that Muslims are expected to give the *zakat* – 2.5% of their income each year to the needy, and most actually do that! What’s sad is that even though our Bible calls on us to give God at least a tithe (10%) of our income to God’s work, the latest data seems to show that we American Christians don’t even give as much as our Muslim friends – we only give a little more 2% ! In 2008 (the latest year statistics are available) American Christians gave an average of 2.43% of annual income to their church (down from 3.11% in 1968). [SOURCE: “*The Chronicle of Philanthropy’s ‘Giving 400’*” in Giving USA, cited in the magazine article “*Spotlight: How We Give*” of Christianity Today (February 2011, Volume 55, Number 2), p. 7 (also found at [www.christianitytoday.com/ct](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct))].

26. Some have referred to this as “*Islamophobia*” – a fear of Islam, & any and all things connected with it.