

# The Jesus Fatwah

## 1. Islam 101

A simple internet search that inquires after basic information about Islam will yield countless websites containing terabytes of information. Much of this information will be of dubious merit, and some of it will be unmitigated malarkey. For the newcomer to the study of Islam, it is hard to know which information is useful and what is not. This introduction contains information on beliefs that all Muslims share; in the accompanying video, you will have the opportunity to meet Muslims and to hear them reflect on these most basic beliefs. Having read about these basic beliefs and having heard Muslims reflect upon how these beliefs bring their faith alive, you will be able better to judge the value of what you hear and read about the religion to which nearly a quarter of all humanity adheres.

To start at the very beginning (a very good place to start), a conversation around the basics of Islam must define and distinguish between two words: "Islam" and "Muslim." Both words are Arabic and are derived from a common root which can mean either "peace" or "submission." "Islam" is the name of a religion that originated in Arabia in the latter half of the sixth century of the Common Era; Islam's adherents are "Muslims." The adjective used to describe Islam is "Islamic," and "Muslim" is both an adjective and a noun.

### *Beliefs & Origins*

But what does Islam teach and what do Muslims believe? The honest answer is this: Muslims believe a lot of different things. There are roughly 1.5 billion Muslims alive today and a wide geographic and cultural diversity marks the lives of the world's vast Muslim community.

Every culture and every place in which Islam is practiced has had an impact on the ways in which Muslims live out their beliefs. Because of its worldwide success and its global appeal, Islam is a dynamic religion and for that reason it can be hard—if not impossible—to distill Islam's basic tenets into an introduction that is both comprehensive and concise. However, there *are* beliefs all Muslims hold in common, foundational doctrines upon which generations of Muslims have built the large, architecturally varied, sometimes mysterious (even to Muslims), and always interesting mansion that is the 21<sup>st</sup> century global House of Islam. An understanding of these foundational principles is essential to the work of exploring the whole Islamic edifice.

Muslims believe that in the year 610 CE, the Angel Gabriel began visiting and revealing a divine message to a devout and spiritually-minded man named Mohammad ibn 'Abdulah. Mohammad was a prominent businessman and civic leader in the Arabian City of Mecca. It is likely that Mohammad was illiterate so he did not write down what he heard from the angel. Instead, he committed the angelic messages to memory and was able to recall and to recite the heavenly words until his death in 632.

Among those who heard Mohammad's recitations of the angel's messages were literate believers able and willing to transcribe what was told them by the prophet. After Mohammad's death, faithful Muslims collected the written records of Mohammad's oral recitations and edited them into a single volume, called the Qur'an. Mohammad's followers also collected and edited— together with stories of Mohammad's life—many of Mohammad's sayings and teachings that were not the recitations of angelic messages. These writings are called the Hadith, and while they are important in the spiritual lives of Muslims, they do not hold the spiritual weight of the Qur'an, which Muslims believe to convey not just words about God, but something of God's very essence.

Besides holding in common the sacred story of God's revelations to Mohammad, Muslims also share six core doctrines.

## *Doctrines*

The first and most important doctrine common to all Muslims is a belief in one God. Islam is an Abrahamic faith, meaning Muslims worship the God of Abraham who also is the God of Judaism and Christianity. While Muslims believe that God has many attributes and names, Muslims usually speak of God by using the Arabic word "Allah," which, literally translated, means "The God." It is not only a word for God that predates the advent of Islam, Arabic speaking Christians and Jews continue to use the word "Allah" in reference to God to this day.

In addition to affirming their belief in one God, all Muslims believe in angels, which makes sense given the centrality of Gabriel in the story of Islam.

All Muslims believe God is revealed in the holy books of the Abrahamic faith. While the Qur'an is the book Muslims hold in highest esteem, they also accept the Jewish and Christian Bibles as being divinely inspired.

All Muslims believe in prophets. As mentioned above, Muslims understand Mohammad to be the greatest and last of the prophets, but Muslims also believe that in the centuries leading up to the establishment of Islam, God sent an untold number of prophets to instruct people in the ways of God. Numbered among the prophets are all of the prophets of the Jewish Bible, and Jesus, who is revered as being one of the greatest of God's prophets.

All Muslims believe in a judgment day and in the afterlife. Like traditional forms of Christianity, Islam is an apocalyptic religion, holding to a final judgment in the fullness of time; as with traditional forms of Christianity, Islam promises a heavenly home as a reward for the righteous.

All Muslims believe in the sovereignty of God.

## *The Five Pillars*

In addition to the theological tenets listed above, Muslims are united by the actions required of faithful Muslims. These religious duties are known as the Five Pillars of Islam.

The first pillar of Islam is the recitation of Islam's most basic belief: "there is no God but God, and Mohammad is the messenger of God." Muslims affirm this belief regularly, especially during times of corporate prayer, which leads to the second pillar of Islam.

The second pillar of Islam is the formal, ritual prayer that occurs five times daily. Like monastic Christians who observe daily offices of prayer, Muslims pray together at regular intervals throughout the day. When they observe the second pillar, Muslims stand shoulder to shoulder facing Mecca. Moving together, they prostrate themselves and kneel and stand in a manner choreographed by centuries of tradition.

The third pillar of Islam is charity. Muslims are required to give 2.5 percent of their net worth to those in need.

The fourth pillar is the requirement that Muslims fast during the month of Ramadan. During Ramadan, a month that commemorates the first set of revelations that eventually would become the Qur'an, adult Muslims who are medically able to do so must refrain from food and drink, and must abstain from sexual intimacy during daylight hours. It is a season of prayer and for deepening spiritual connection.

The fifth and final pillar of Islam is the Hajj, the sacred pilgrimage to Mecca. During the pilgrimage, Muslims visit sacred sights associated with the Qur'an's telling of stories about Ishmael and Hagar. Pilgrims also walk around a sacred stone called the Kaaba and they pray together in the desert. During the Hajj, pilgrims dress in identical clothing as a way of symbolizing the equality of all mortals before God.

## *A Great Diversity*

Every major religious tradition has core beliefs shared by all the religion's adherents, but every religious tradition also has historical divisions,

denominations, and divergent schools of thought that separate the faithful. Sometimes these divisions give rise to mutual animosity, especially when the various camps become associated with a particular ethnicity or political persuasion. Islam is no different.

The most important division among Muslims dates back to the first decades of the movement, when a violent debate erupted over how to choose a leader to succeed Mohammad after his death. The resulting division separated Islam into two major branches—the Shiite and the Sunni—a division that endures into the modern era. Currently, roughly 85 percent of Muslims are Sunni, and 15 percent are Shiite, who, though a minority globally, hold majority status in some predominantly Muslim countries, including Iran and Iraq.

Within the Shiite and Sunni branches of Islam, there are various schools of thought and there is a wide diversity of theological traditions. There also are splinter groups—the Nation of Islam will be most familiar to Americans—that fall outside the parameters of what most scholars consider, technically, to be Islam.

This great diversity of tradition and theology provides the curious student ample opportunity to learn, and to those interested in engaging in interfaith conversation with Muslims, the wide variety of ways people practice Islam can provide a good place to start the discussion.

-- Ben Daniel

---

## **Discussion Questions** (pause DVD after each video segment)

### **Muslim Demographics**

1. What stood out for you in Muna Ali's overview of Muslim demographics?
2. How do the demographics compare to your perceptions of Muslim demographics prior to viewing this segment?

### **Basic Muslim Beliefs**

1. What element(s) of Islamic doctrine presented in the reading and video surprised you?

2. What traditional Muslim belief can you point to as similar to traditional Christian beliefs?
3. How are traditional Muslim beliefs different from traditional Christian beliefs?

### **The Five Pillars of Islam**

1. How has your understanding of Islamic practice changed by what you've heard in this segment?
2. How are the religious obligations of Islam similar or different to the religious obligations of your faith tradition?

### **The Qur'an and the Hadith**

1. What surprised you about the Qur'an?
2. Based on the information in this segment, how is the role of the Qur'an in Islam different than or the same as the role of sacred texts in your tradition?
3. In other traditions, what kind of sayings and non-canonical stories would be the equivalent of the Hadith?

### **The Mosque and the Madrassa**

1. How did this segment's presentation of the Mosque and the Madrassa differ from your understanding of how those institutions function in Islam?
2. Compare and contrast the Mosque with the equivalent space in Judaism and Christianity.
3. What do you imagine are the differences and similarities between the religious education of a Madrassa and the religious education imparted by faith-based schools in your tradition?

## **Muslim Values**

1. Share one way your understanding of Muslim values has changed by what you've read or heard in this session.
  
2. In what way(s) are Muslim values similar or different to the values of other faith traditions?
  
3. How are basic Muslim values similar or different than your own personal values?

### ***The Jesus Fatwah* Theme Question:**

What element or learning from this session do you think will be most significant in your everyday interactions with others?

