

Ecumenical/Interfaith Committee

Introduction to Islam

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What is Islam

The Arabic word "Islam" literally means "surrender" or "submission." Islam, as a faith, means total and sincere surrender to God so that one can live in peace and tranquility. The Arabic word "salam" means "peace" and the phrase "assalamu alaikum" means "peace be with you", which is the greeting of Muslims around the world. This peace is achieved through active obedience to the revealed commandments of God, and by following the teachings of His prophet, Muhammad, the son of Abdullah, who was born in Makkah in 570 AD.

It was not Muhammad, but Adam, who first brought Islam to humanity. Then, each prophet and messenger came to exhort the people to a clear understanding of God's commandments. They offered teachings relevant to their time until God chose the final prophet, Muhammad, to come with the Last Testament referred to as the Qur'an. It is the Muslim's holy book that speaks in detail regarding five of the twenty-five recognized prophets and who are considered to be the chief prophets of authority: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad.

Oneness

Islam's central emphasis is on the uniqueness and oneness of God in His names and attributes. God is unique in every way. He cannot be limited in any way for He is The Creator of everything. The Qur'an illustrates that by saying:

"God! None is worthy of worship, but He, The Ever-Living, The One, who sustains and protects all that exists. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth. Who is he that can intercede with Him except with His permission? He knows what happens to them [His creatures] in this world, and what will happen to them in the Hereafter. And they will never encompass anything of His knowledge except that which He wills. The pedestal of His throne extends over the heavens and the earth, and He feels no fatigue in guarding and preserving them. And He is The Most High, The Supreme."
[Qur'an 2:255]

The name Islam is universal in meaning. Islam is not named after a tribe of people or an individual, as Judaism is named after the tribe of Judah, Christianity after Christ, and Buddhism after Buddha. Islam is not a name chosen by human beings; it was divinely communicated from God and in that regard - Islam is a global faith.

Why we are here

The teachings of the Qur'an and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad instruct the believers and Muslims to observe the 5 pillars of Islam:

- Shahada (Testimony of Faith – there is no God, but Allah & Muhammad is the messenger and prophet of God)
- Salat (5 daily prayers)
- Sawm (fasting during the entire month of Ramadan)
- Zakat (offering the annual welfare due)
- Hajj (perform pilgrimage at least once in a lifetime to Makkah, the place where Abraham and his son Ishmael built the first mosque on the earth, the Kabbah; and where the story of Abraham offering his son to be sacrificed took place.)

These 5 pillars are the foundation of the faith and are meant to help Muslims to pay attention to the real reason why we were created by God on the surface of this earth. It is for one reason and that is to worship God and to know God as He wants us to know Him.

99 Names

The Qur'an introduced us to the presence of God (Allah) through learning more about His 99 attributes/names. The Merciful (Al Rahman) is God's chosen name that is repeated before each of the 114 chapters in the Qur'an. He is the Loving God (Al Wadoud) and He instructs us to love everyone around us and look at things through the lenses of love, mercy and compassion.

Human Being

"Al Insaan – the human being" is the focus of the message of the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad. Treating humans around us with the utmost level of respect is the main message of Islam. By being a true human being to your fellow human beings is the essence of worshipping God. You can pray, fast and give in charity as much as you want, but if you are not a good human being to others, then the Qur'an says all this worship is not producing the proper results expected from the worship.

The Heart

Listening to the commandments of God on how to be a successful human being and using the knowledge with which God equipped our brain, requires a sound heart. The Qur'an also focuses heavily on the "heart" and draws a lot of lines under this word to confirm what our minds are thinking. It is the heart that inspires the brain to think and the heart that checks whether the brain is thinking properly or not.

That's why the Quran said: It is not the eyes that go blind, but it is the heart:

"So have they not traveled through the earth and have hearts by which to reason and ears by which to hear? For indeed, it is not eyes that are blinded, but blinded are the hearts, which are within the breasts." Qur'an 22:46

Unfortunately, the media does not talk about the diseases of the heart that ruin your eternal future. We don't hear in the news about the ethical values and morality in Islam. The Qur'an equated backbiting others to eating the flesh of someone who is dead. It is just an example in chapter 49 verse 12. No gossiping, no cheating, no lying, and many more moral responsibilities that could impact our heart and ruin our spirit.

Islam & Iman

The Qur'an divides its readers into "Believers" and "Muslims"

- Believers are those, who felt and witnessed the presence of God deep in their hearts. They have been completely transformed from merely humans with an animalistic desire to godly and enlightened beings, who behave according to the pleasure of Allah.
- Muslims are those, who testified and declared the first pillar of Islam, the testimony of faith, "La Ilaha Illa Allah, Muhammadan Rasulallah – There is no God, but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah." This statement is the first step into Islam and welcomes anyone to the global Muslim community.

Based on that, yes, we have close to 1.7 billion Muslims around the world, but are all of them "believers", who uphold the true teachings of Islam? This is the \$64K question.

Terrorism

It saddens me today when I see how many media outlets talk about Islam and associate it with terrorism, extremism and violence; and equate those, who are committing these acts, with all Muslims.

It is well-established that these criminal acts have nothing to do with the teachings of Islam, the true messages of spirituality that we see in the Qur'an, the deep connection between the individual and Almighty God, and how this relation must be reflected in our daily interaction with all humanity and the entire creation. The teachings of the Qur'an clearly say, if we missed these facts, then our life has no meaning on the surface of this earth. We will be like the animals who are just eating, drinking and procreating, but without a noble purpose.

The Sultan & The Saint

St. Francis went to meet the Sultan because he rejected the violence of the Crusades and religious wars. After meeting the Sultan and experiencing Muslim spirituality, St. Francis experienced a transformation in which he had a new vision of Christians and Muslims living in peace and harmony, and saw his mission and that of his followers to be one of building bridges between the people of the two faith traditions.

Today, almost 99% of Muslims around the world do not talk about or have not heard of the story of the Sultan & the Saint.

This is one of the most important stories today for the Muslim world. It has almost been forgotten in the Arab world. I have been asking many of my friends and people I come across: "Do you remember or have you read about the story of the Sultan and the Saint?" Most have never heard the story!!!

Now we are in a crisis!! We only talk about problems like Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, Zawahiri and Isis. We don't talk about the Sultan, who welcomed St. Francis and engaged in discussions with him. Also in the West, we should talk more about St. Francis, who went to build bridges of interfaith, dialogue and outreach.

I was reading in Arabic from different Christian sources in the Middle East how this story impacted Christians in the Holy Land and other places in the Middle East.

I really feel that it is about time that our faith communities in America do a little bit more that is guided by the spirit of the Sultan, who welcomed the Saint. As an Imam in the U.S, I feel it is about time to use this story and prepare a curriculum accessible to various audiences regardless of their religion, age or nationality to transmit the true meaning of brotherhood, spirituality and compassion, which is the only path to peaceful coexistence in a religiously and culturally pluralistic world. We are witnessing a unique period in the history of mankind. We have social media and the super information highway that are accessible on every corner of this earth. The challenge for us is how we are going to use these kinds of blessings from Almighty? The blessings of knowledge and the blessings of technology can be used for our benefit or for our destruction. Are we going to use them for our well-being or for our ego and self-fulfillment?

I hope that a new era is about to start. These days, with the issues of refugees and immigrants, who are part of the results of broken systems of our civilization of today, the only solution is true cooperation between the followers of the Sultan and the followers of Saint Francis, Muslims and Christians.

Thank you very much.

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