

Facts and Issues

Islam

A Catholic Perspective



As recent controversies and conflicts have reminded Catholics everywhere, the relationship between the Church and the Islamic world is complex and sometimes sorrowful. Historically, these two great religions have clashed through the centuries. Today, Christians suffer persecution in many Muslim lands, while Muslims complain of prejudice and discrimination against them in many countries of the Christian West. The fact that Islam is the fastest growing faith on the planet makes the search for dialogue and understanding even more essential for the future.

What is Islam?

Islam is the second largest religion on the earth, with more than 1.3 billion members worldwide. By comparison, there are 2.1 billion Christians, of whom 1.1 billion are Roman Catholic. The word *Islam* means “grateful surrender or submission (to God).” It is considered one of the three great monotheistic religions (Judaism and Christianity being the other two). It was begun in the early seventh century by Mohammed, a former merchant from Arabia, on the basis of the revelation Muslims believe he received near the city of Mecca, in modern Saudi Arabia. Muslims proclaim that this revelation, recorded in the *Qu’ran* (or *Koran*, as it is sometimes spelled), is from the one God, *Allah*, and that Mohammed was the last in a long series of prophets sent by God, beginning with Adam and continuing through Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus.



Who is Allah?

Muslims believe in the one God, *Allah* in Arabic. According to the *Qu’ran*, God is one and transcendent, Creator and Sustainer of the universe, all merciful and all compassionate Ruler and Judge. God possesses numerous other titles, known collectively as the 99 Names of God. The profession of faith states: “There is no god but *Allah* and Mohammed is the messenger of God.”



The Tenets of Islam

The basis of Islamic belief is the *Qu’ran*, the literal word of God revealed to Mohammed through the angel Gabriel. The *Qu’ran* was written originally in Arabic. Translations of the text into other languages are to be used only for personal purposes and are not considered valid for official religious use.

Muslims believe in final judgment, resurrection of the body, heaven, and hell. They also follow divinely revealed moral norms and dietary regulations (e.g. avoiding alcoholic beverages and pork). On Fridays, noon prayers are said in a mosque and an imam gives a sermon. Muslims do not have an ordained ministry.

There are five essential duties every Muslim must perform. They are called the Five Pillars:

- the daily recitation of the profession of the Muslim faith.
- ritual worship five times a day, facing in the direction of the holy city of Mecca, the cradle of Islam.
- almsgiving.
- fasting from dawn to dusk during the holy month of Ramadan, the time when the revelation of the *Qur’an* to Mohammed is said to have begun.
- making at least one pilgrimage (called the *hajj*) to Mecca.

From the time of Mohammed’s death, Islam suffered bitter division over his rightful successor. Today, Islam has many different sects whose dealings with each other are at times troubled by sectarian strife. The two largest Islamic denominations are the Sunni (who comprise around 85-90% of all Muslims) and the Shia (or Shi’ites).

Jesus and Mary in the *Qu'ran*

Islam does not recognize Jesus as the Son of God but does acknowledge him as a prophet. The *Qur'an* records his miraculous birth, teachings, and miracles performed with God's permission, but it also stresses that he was only human, not divine. Islamic teachings are thus at sharp variance to Christian belief in the Holy Trinity. The Blessed Virgin Mary is the only woman named in the *Qu'ran*. She is venerated by Muslims as the mother of Jesus and as a righteous woman in her own right.



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How does the Catholic Church view Islam?

The attitude of the Church toward Islam was stated clearly by the Second Vatican Council's "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" (*Nostra Aetate*, No. 3; cf. *Lumen Gentium*, No. 16) when it taught: "The Church has a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to men. They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God."

The council declared in the same document the lamentable history of Christian-Muslim relations: "Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding." These often painful historical "quarrels and dissensions" remain very much a part of the modern consciousness of Muslims and many Christians and color their reactions to events even today.



Centuries of War

In the century after the founding of Islam, Muslim armies swept across the Holy Land, North Africa, and into Spain, driving north until A.D. 732, when a Christian army defeated them at Poitiers, France, and

halted their advance in the West. The ancient Christian sees of Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria were overrun, and countless dioceses ceased to exist. Muslim armies under the Ottoman Turks threatened Europe in a similar fashion in the sixteenth century, until the Turkish fleet was halted at the famous Battle of Lepanto in 1571. This event is commemorated by the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary on October 7.

For their part, Muslims view as objectionable the medieval Crusades to recapture the Holy Land, the *Reconquista* that expelled the Moors from Spain in the fifteenth century, and the recent genocide against Muslims in former Yugoslavia during the 1990s.

Occasions of Dialogue

At the same time, peaceful dialogue has long existed between Christians and Muslims. Around 781, for example, the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I carried on a discourse with the Caliph Muhammad al-Mahdi at Baghdad; and, in the thirteenth century, the great

Dominican apologist Raymond of Peñafort advised Christians to pursue peaceful discussions with Muslims. Raymond also encouraged St. Thomas Aquinas to write his treatise *Summa contra gentiles* ("On the Truth of the Catholic Faith against the Errors of the Unbelievers"), intended for outreach to Muslims and those of other faiths.

St. Francis and the Sultan

One of the most touching efforts at Catholic-Muslim dialogue occurred during the Fifth Crusade (1217-1221) in Egypt. Convinced that peace could be found if the Sultan of Egypt, Malik al-Kamil (1180-1238), converted to Christianity, St. Francis of Assisi and a single companion walked boldly into the Sultan's camp. Sultan al-Kamil listened politely and declined to convert, but he sent Francis and his fellow friar safely back to the Crusaders.



Christians in Islamic Lands

Jews and Christians living under Islamic rule in the past customarily were called *dhimmis* (essentially "free" or "non-slaves") and were permitted to practice their faith privately, as long as they paid a special tax called the *jizya*. Living conditions for the *dhimmis* varied greatly and there were periods of severe oppression and also enforced conversions.

Today, there are an estimated 40 million Christians under Islamic governments throughout the world. Sadly, many Christians face legal disabilities, discrimination, and even martyrdom in such countries as Algeria, Egypt, Nigeria, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. As a result, venerable Christian populations in Muslim lands are shrinking rapidly as Christians flee to the safety of western countries.

Recent Popes and Islam

The Second Vatican Council inaugurated a new era of dialogue with Islam, marked especially by the efforts of John Paul II. While Pope John Paul pressed for the

rights of Catholics in Muslim lands, he also met with Muslims both in Rome and during his trips abroad. History was made on May 6, 2001, when he became the first pontiff to visit a mosque, the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus.

Pope Benedict XVI has reiterated the Church's respect and esteem for Islam, and Catholics continue to hope for progress in dialogue with Islam, especially through the principle of reciprocity. The principle demands that Muslim countries safeguard the basic rights and freedoms of Christian minorities — including freedom to worship — in the same way that those freedoms are enjoyed by Muslims in Christian countries. As Pope Benedict declared in February 2006, "For believers, as for all people of good will, the only path that leads to peace and brotherhood is that of respect for the religious convictions and practices of others."

Islam and Christianity Today — Common Ground

Pope Benedict XVI sees many reasons for continuing dialogue with Muslims, despite the challenges caused by the presence of radical elements in the Islamic world. Catholics and Muslims share similar religious values, such as opposition to abortion and euthanasia, a commitment to family life, and recognition of the dangers of relativism, materialism, and violent fundamentalism.

On August 20, 2005, the pope called upon Muslims everywhere to resist terrorism and intolerance in all its forms, as he addressed representatives of Islam in Cologne, Germany: "Dear friends, I am profoundly convinced that we must not yield to the negative pressures in our midst, but must affirm the values of mutual respect, solidarity and peace. The life of every human being is sacred, both for Christians and



for Muslims. There is plenty of scope for us to act together in the service of fundamental moral values."

Resources

The Second Vatican Council's "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" (*Nostra Aetate*) remains the *magna carta* of the Church's response to Non-Christian religions. It is available on the Internet at: www.vatican.va/.

Also on the Web:

Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue,
www.vatican.va/.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops,
Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs,
www.usccb.org/seia.

Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA),
www.icna.org.

Other Resources

Cardinal Francis Arinze, *The Church in Dialogue: Walking With Other Believers* (Ignatius Press, 1990).

Midwest Dialogue of Catholics and Muslims,
Revelation: Catholic & Muslim Perspectives (USCCB, 2005).

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