

SESSION 1

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Isn't Islam inherently more violent than Christianity since it started out with such violent origins?

It is helpful to keep in mind when reviewing the history of Islam's origins that the violence inherent in its founding was based primarily in response to persecution. It became more expansionist in nature later on. Judaism, sharing much of the same tribal culture as Islam also has a very violent history of genocide and invasion. Christianity's history isn't any better when we consider the Crusades, killing heretics, the Inquisition and pretty much all of Christendom from Constantinople to the present time. At least six Popes were assassinated and another fourteen who died under suspicious circumstances. Islam does not have the corner on utilizing violence in the name of religion to gain power further certain political goals. More will be discussed on this in subsequent sessions.

It's also helpful to remember that when Jesus arrived as the Messiah, the expectation was that he was going to be a military ruler who would go to war and establish Israel over all other nations. Violent militaristic expansionism is deeply rooted in the cultures and histories of all three traditions.

Q: Do we all worship the same God?

This is a difficult question to answer because of how each tradition views God. From the standpoint of all three worship a Creator God who spoke and interacted with humanity, sharing much of the same history and narrative of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, the Prophets, etc.— yes, this is essentially the same God. However, the divergence in our understandings of God comes through the way each tradition believes God has revealed himself to humanity. Christians believe God revealed himself and his nature through Jesus Christ. Jews believe God is revealed in the teachings of the Torah and through the prophets. Islam believes that God was revealed correctly only through the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an. The sticking point becomes that in the cases of Christianity and Islam in particular, the nature of who and what God is, what God wants, and how God acts diverges considerably. Jesus as Son of God is central to the Christian understanding and revelation of God. Islam denies this central point of Christian understanding, that Jesus was an important prophet, but not divine. This changes dramatically the nature of the God we both worship, in that one worships a God willing to come down and get messy with his creation (Christianity) while the other believes God is too holy to ever do such a thing (Islam). Christians also rely upon the saving power of Christ in order to be resurrected. Islam believes that submitting and applying oneself to the teachings of the Qur'an is the way in which one is saved. These two beliefs are in opposition to one another, as they reveal two very different understandings of who and what God is and the very nature of how he relates to humanity.

That said – is the God we understand, as Christians, capable of working in and through people who understand God differently than we do? One need only look at the Biblical narrative to answer this question. In the Old Testament in particular, God frequently worked through people who were not Israelites to accomplish his goals and provide blessings (ie: Balak and Balaam, Numbers 22).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- As a Christian, how do you think God wishes to be revealed through you?
- The word “Muslim” means “one who submits (to God).” The Apostle Paul tells us to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (Ephesians 5:21) How do you “submit” to God and how can understanding the idea of submission help in understanding our Muslim neighbors better?
- Think of the number of Christians that you have a difference of opinion with over the nature of God and how we are called to respond and interpret Jesus’ teachings, and how irritated you sometimes become when we are all broad-stroked under the same umbrella. Now think about all the variations of thought that likely exist within Islam. How many Muslims do you think likely have differing views and understandings of their own faith? Do you think they sometimes feel the same frustrations at being lumped all together so broadly?
- Have you ever personally met a Muslim? If so, have you ever engaged them in conversation and asked them what it is about Islam that speaks to them?