

Christianity and Islam

jihad - Litterally “struggle,” the “greater” jihad is the struggle within oneself to live a righteous life and submit oneself to God’s will. The “lesser” jihad is the defense of Islam and the Muslim community.

Kaaba - The “House of God” located in Mecca. A large cube draped in black cloth embroidered in gold and containing the Black Stone that Muslims believe was placed there by Abraham and Ishmael. The holiest spot in Islam, it is circumambulated seven times by pilgrims during the **Hajj**.

mihrab - An ornamental niche in the wall of each mosque indicating the direction of Mecca toward which Muslims must face while praying.

minbar - Pulpit in each mosque.

mufti - A specialist in Islamic Law capable of delivering a **fatwa**.

mujtahid - A person qualified to exercise independent reasoning when interpreting **Shariah**.

Quran - Muslim Scriptures believed by Muslims to be a direct revelation of God dictated to Muhammad in Arabic, the language of God.

rakay - The series of body movements that are part of the **Salat**, Muslim prayers.

Ramadan - The Muslim month of fasting.

Salat - The Second Pillar of Islam. The five prayer sequences required daily by Muslims.

Sawm - The Fast of Ramadan. The Fourth Pillar of Islam.

Shada - The Declaration of Faith. The First Pillar of Islam.

Shariah - Islamic Law as established in the Quran and Hadith.

Shiite - The second largest group of Muslims that broke away from the **Sunni** Muslims and who believe that descendants of Muhammad should have been the first **Caliphs** instead of the ones that were selected. They believe that Ali, the fourth Caliph and cousin of Muhammad was the first rightful leader of Islam and was followed by eleven more **Imams** as leaders of the Shiites.

Sufis - Muslim spiritual mystics.

Sunnis - The largest group of Muslims, 85% of the world total.

Sura - A chapter of the **Quran**.

Wahabbi - Ultra fundamentalist **Sunni** Muslims who are dominant in Saudi Arabia and who have spawned many of the modern fundamentalist extremist groups.

Zakat - Alms giving. The Third Pillar of Islam.

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Glossary of Arab Terms

Note: Arab terms are transliterated into English and, because some sounds in Arabic do not exist in English, they are spelled many different ways.

alim (plural **ulama**) - An Islamic scholar of the religious sciences, a theologian, a guardian of the legal and religious traditions of Islam.

al Qaeda - A radical fundamentalist offshoot of Wahabbi Islam whose focus has moved to military and terrorist activities against secular Islamic governments, forces occupying Islamic countries, and governments that it believes are oppressing Islam around the world.

ayas - Single verses of the **Quran**.

burqa - Traditional women's clothing in conservative/fundamentalist Islamic countries (such as Afghanistan under the Taliban) that covers everything except the eyes.

Caliph - title of the early successors of Muhammad that served as political and religious leaders of the Islamic Empire.

chador - Traditional women's clothing in **Shiite** Iran that covers everything except the face, hands and feet.

Eid ul Fitr - Feast of the Breaking of the Fast, a major Muslim holiday that concludes the fasting of **Ramadan** called the **Sawm**.

Eid ul Adha - Feast of the Sacrifice, the most important Muslim holiday which falls at the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca called the **Haji**.

fatwa - A learned religious paper offering an opinion on Islamic Law issued by a religious scholar called a **mufti**, usually on theological issues but can also be a call for a military **jihad**.

Hadith - Collections of reports about Muhammad's deeds and sayings that are considered to be Scripture by Muslims.

Haji - The Fifth Pillar of Islam, the pilgrimage to Mecca that Muslims are expected to make at least once in a lifetime if they are physically and financially able.

hijab - Traditional women's clothing in **Sunni** areas that covers everything except the face, hands and feet.

Imam - For **Sunni** Muslims, a term for the clergyman attached to a mosque who leads prayers, delivers Friday sermons, and provides pastoral, teaching, and administrative services. For **Shiite** Muslims, a title for twelve of Muhammad's male descendants, beginning with Ali, who served as successive overall leaders of Shiite Islam and who are considered to have been divinely inspired so that their writings are additional Scripture for the Shiites.

illegitimate offshoots of Islam just as the Ku Klux Klan and other racist and violent survivalist movements are illegitimate offshoots of Christianity.

Ultimately, our faith in the revelation of God we know from the life of Christ and the revelation of God that Muslims know from the Quran demands that we find a way to curtail the radicals of both religions as well as the abuses of governments and industries that seem to be pushing us toward a world that is in conflict with both our religions.

Reflection Questions:

1. *What can we, as individual Christians, do to bring about better understanding and cooperation between Christians and Muslims?*
2. *What should the Christian community do when governments or industries do things that are in conflict with the teachings of Christ?*
3. *How can we express the love of God as we understand it in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to Muslims?*

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Introduction

Christianity and Islam are the world’s two largest and most evangelistic religions and with modern advances in technology, we are more and more aware of one another. However, Christians and Muslims have historically been largely uninformed about one another and our understanding has often been biased by popular mythology and media headlines.

The two religions share many common beliefs and practices but the combination of cultural differences and the hostilities of governments and liberation movements have often fostered hatred instead of tolerance. Clearly, the more that we understand one another, the more likely we are to find ways to cooperate or, at least, coexist in the world. This all-too-brief study aims at showing the primary similarities and differences between us in the hope that a greater understanding will foster greater tolerance and love at a time when our secular world seems to be pushing us toward hostility.

Ronn Kerr

tional military force against Islamic radicals and the only result has been the strengthening of the will and recruiting success of the terrorists.

The overwhelming majority of Muslims abhor terrorist acts against non-combatants – such as the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center – but they continue to support liberation movements against occupying forces. So long as Israel occupies Palestinian land and America occupies Iraqi land, the fighters involved in trying to liberate their people will be heroes to a great many Muslims around the world.

Certainly, the vast Muslim majority that affirms the Quran’s call to peace and brotherhood must find a way to curtail the actions of the minority fundamentalist radicals. In the footsteps of Muhammad, they must find a way to make the traditional Islamic call to personal holiness, to tolerance of others, and to building a just and benevolent society more important than the kind of non-Muslim hatred that feeds the radicals. It is also clear that the Christians of the world must find the way to reign in the abuses that Western governments and industries continue to inflict on Muslims around the world. In the footsteps of Jesus, we must love our Muslim neighbors as much as we love ourselves, forgive their trespasses, and seek ways to assist them in building their own new world.

But, peace, tolerance and cooperation between Christians and Muslims demands that we accept one another as we are without trying to change one another. Muslims must accept that Christians are often in conflict with their secular governments just as Muslims are in conflict with their secular governments but that in Western democracies Christians who are committed to the cause of peace and justice are not usually a large enough voting bloc to significantly redirect the focus of governments and industries. Muslims must also come to understand that there is an even wider variety of Christians than Muslims and that they need to better understand our differences just as we are seeking to better understand theirs.

Similarly, Christians must accept that a central tenant of Islam is the concept that all of life comes under religious law – politics, government, military action, sex, family life, business, education, diet, clothing, etc. – and that separation of “church and state” as it has come to be accepted in the West is a sacrilegious idea for them. It is also important for us to understand that Islam does not want to be “Westernized” because it does not see anything that it really wants in the West. For eight decades, Muslims excelled in mathematics, science, education, and the arts without accepting Western concepts of democracy, public sexuality, and rampant materialism and they believe the West is trying to impose these things on them. Finally, Christians must accept that radical terrorist movements are

alism aimed at stealing their oil.

Because of advanced technology, Christians and Muslims around the world are in greater contact than they have ever been before and are more aware of one another than ever before. American and European news organizations no longer dominate the entire world and news organizations such as al-Jazeera and others provide different slants on events than Western media. Because of this, both mainstream Muslims and radical fundamentalists have developed an abiding distrust of American and European government policies that they view as “Christian” policies directed against Muslims.

For example, even though Muslims generally understand Christian ethics to be similar to their own, they see vast differences between the teachings of Christ and the actions of American and European governments and industries. They are aware that the United States was quick to impose sanctions on Muslim Pakistan for developing nuclear weapons but did nothing when Hindu India and Jewish Israel did the same. They see Americans and Europeans moving into peacekeeping roles in places like Kosovo while looking the other way when Chechnyan and Kashmiri conflicts broke out.

Muslims complain that American military forces never left the Islamic state of Saudi Arabia after the 1991 Gulf War where they believe their presence defiles Islam’s two most holy shrines. They watched while American and European governments enforced devastating sanctions on the Iraqi people because they had a tyrannical leader while they allowed dozens of non-Muslim tyrants to rule without hindrance. They believe that America, with the world’s largest stockpile of weapons of mass destruction, used a false claim of existing weapons of mass destruction as the reason to invade Islamic Iraq while ignoring the development of similar weapons in Christian countries. And, most important, Muslims are keenly aware that Western nations provide massive economic and military support to help Israel occupy Palestine and keep Palestinians in captivity.

As long as Islamic terrorist acts are aimed at innocent civilians in Western nations, the governments of these nations will respond with heavy military action because that is the traditional way in which Western nations have handled aggression against them. But, traditional military action has not historically been very effective against fanatical religious terrorists. Instead of focusing on the fundamentalist radicals, military action focuses on governments, traditional armies, and infrastructure without doing much damage to the secret societies of the radical sects. The French, Russians, Americans, British and Israelis have all used tradi-

Chapter One: The World’s Two Largest Religions

Christianity and Islam are the world’s two largest religions and, together, they count a little more than half of the world’s population as adherents. Even though Christianity is currently the larger of the two, Islam is growing faster and, unless the statistical patterns change radically, Islam will be larger than Christianity in a few short years.

Based on United Nations’ figures, Islam is growing at the rate of 6.4% per year while Christianity is growing at the rate of 1.5% per year and, in the last five decades, Islam has grown by 235% while Christianity has grown by 47%. Even though these figures are disputed by some Christian organizations, the fact that Islam is growing at a substantially faster rate is not questioned. The areas of the world in which Islam is growing the fastest (the United States, Europe, and Australia) are the exact areas in which the percentage of Christians is declining. According to many statisticians, Islam is now the second largest religious group in most of the traditional Christian nations such as the United States, Britain and France.

Both Christianity and Islam are widespread with some adherents in virtually every country. Christianity is the majority religion in North America, South America, Europe, Australia and the southernmost area of Africa. Islam is the majority religion in most of the rest of the world.

Only Israel which has a Jewish majority, India and Nepal with Hindu majorities, and a few Asian countries with Buddhist majorities are not dominated by Christianity or Islam. However, even in countries with other majorities, Christianity and/or Islam are usually the second largest religions (Hindu India is 11% Muslim and 3% Christian, Jewish Israel is 14% Muslim and 2% Christian, Buddhist Thailand is 4% Muslim and 1% Christian, etc.)

48 nations in the world are predominantly Islamic and 21 nations have governments based on Islamic law. Even though most Westerners think of Islam as being Arabic, the six countries with the largest Islamic populations (Indonesia, 170 million Muslims; Pakistan, 136 million; Bangladesh, 106 million; India, 103 million; Turkey; 62 million; and Iran, 61 million) are non-Arab countries. The largest Arab country, Egypt, has the world's seventh largest Islamic population with 54 million Muslims. The area of the world in which Islam makes up the smallest percentage of the population is Latin America where it has actually been declining in recent years.

However, accurate statistics on religious adherents are difficult to come by and are skewed by many factors. The figures are gathered in many different ways, some of which are filled with extreme bias. Also, gathering statistics on religious adherents faces some serious "qualitative" questions. For instance, how religious does a person have to be to be counted as an adherent to a particular faith? Some European countries are listed as being nearly 100% Christian and their entire populations are counted even though only 1 to 5 percent of the population ever attends church. Several countries whose government and legal structures are based on Islamic law are usually listed as being 100% Islamic and their entire populations are counted in the Islamic figures. And, every religion has nominal adherents who count themselves as Christian or Muslim but who rarely participate in religious activities or rituals.

Still, when figures from a variety of sources are examined, the fact remains that the adherents of Christianity and Islam make up more than half of all the religious persons in the world. Christianity is currently the largest religion in the world but Islam is the fastest growing.

Similarities of Christianity and Islam

Christianity and Islam have much in common. Both began in the Middle East growing out of the ministry of a single charismatic leader – Jesus and Muhammed. Both Christianity and Islam are "religions of the book" in that they adhere to sacred Scriptures. Christianity grew out of

At the other extreme, the most liberal Christians and Muslims take a pluralist stance and avow that all religions are simply different revelations of the same God and that truth and salvation are available in all religions. A more logical and compassionate stance is somewhere in between these two poles. Most Christians and Muslims can affirm that we have much in common, that we share a faith in the same God, and that the moral teachings of the Quran, Hadith, and New Testament are generally parallel. We can agree that there is a significant degree of truth available in both religions but that we each affirm some ideas and practices the other cannot accept.

With the exception of the Crusades, the colonial period, and the clashes between Christians and Muslims in Spain and Yugoslavia, the two religions lived in reasonable harmony for hundreds of years. Both existed side by side on the fringes of their worlds with little conflict largely because both respected the other and tolerated the other's ideas and practices. In the modern world, even though tensions are beginning to build, Muslims are a growing minority free from oppression in the United States and Europe and Christian minorities function as full members of society in large Muslim countries such as Turkey, Egypt and Indonesia

Second, it is likely that Christians and Muslims will grow more and more hostile to one another unless the underlying causes of the tensions are changed or, at least, eased. There is great inequality in the world. The majority of Christians live in affluent, industrialized nations in which religion has been allocated to the church and family life without much influence on government, business or the media. In contrast, the majority of Muslims live in poor, agrarian countries in which religion has considerable influence on the way all facets of life are carried out.

For thirteen centuries the Islamic world was largely ignored by the West except for the debacles of the Crusades and colonial imperialism. In the early years of the Twentieth Century, as Muslims began to emerge from the humiliation of two centuries of colonialism, many thought the only way to recover was to emulate the secular governments of Western nations that had brought about the end of Islam's great golden age. Then, vast reserves of oil were discovered under many of the Middle Eastern Islamic countries and this changed perspectives in both the East and the West. Muslims realized they have the potential for raising themselves out of poverty and restoring the once great Islamic empire without changing their culture or sacred beliefs. But, at the same time, a renewed interest in the Islamic world by Western governments and industries led many Muslims to believe that the new interest is merely a new kind of imperi-

Chapter Thirteen: The Future of Christianity and Islam

There is nothing that either Christians or Muslims can do to change what has happened in the past but there is growing concern in both religions that we must find a way to cooperate or, at least, coexist in the future. Eighty per cent of the world's nations have either Christian or Islamic majorities and virtually all of the remaining countries have substantial minorities of the world's two most populace religions. The recent escalation of terrorist acts by fundamentalist Muslim groups and the recent military actions by the Americans, British, Russians, and Israelis against Muslim populations has certainly become a cause for alarm in both religions. In countries with sizeable Christian or Muslim minorities, the levels of hostility from the majority have been increasing at a steady pace and there is growing fear that the death toll on both sides could become enormous.

In analyzing where we go from here, a few important issues present themselves. First, both Christians and Muslims must decide how they feel about the other. Currently, conservative Christians take exclusivist stances and affirm that truth is found only in Christ just as conservative Muslims affirm that truth is found only in the Quran. These conservatives of both religions tend to identify the other as illegitimate and pagan and argue that the only valid response is to destroy the other or convert its members.

Judaism and accepts the Jewish Old Testament Scriptures even though it added the New Testament to form its complete canon. Islam grew out of both Judaism and Christianity and accepts both the Jewish Old Testament and the Christian New Testament even though it added the Quran to form its complete canon.

Christians believe that the Apostles wrote the New Testament during the century after the death of Jesus. Some more conservative Christians affirm that the New Testament is the absolute Word of God that was dictated directly by God to the First Century writers while others understand the New Testament to be a book written by the followers of Jesus who were more concerned about making theological statements than about recording accurate historical, geographical, scientific, and biological details. Muslims believe that the Quran was dictated to Muhammad by God through the angel Gabriel. Then, the prophet, who could not read or write, gave the information word-by-word to others who wrote it down. Among even the most liberal Muslims, the belief that the Quran is the actual Word of God is rarely questioned.

Christians accept the Old Testament figures of Abraham, Moses, and the prophets as God's representatives on earth even though they believe that Jesus was God's complete and final revelation. Likewise, Islam accepts both the Old Testament figures and Jesus as prophets of God even though they believe the final and most important prophet of God was Muhammad.

Both Christianity and Islam are monotheistic religions focused on a graceful God of love and both religions, in general, preach tolerance, emphasize the unity of all of humankind, and urge benevolence toward the poor, the weak, and the oppressed in society. And yet, both Christianity and Islam have a history of violence toward one another and, both religions have radical fundamentalist minorities that preach violence and hatred under the guise of religion.

Both Christianity and Islam are evangelistic religions meaning that adherents firmly believe they are called to spread their faith to every human being. Many Christians believe that salvation comes only through trust in Christ or "faith alone in Christ alone" as it was defined during the Protestant Reformation. Therefore, affirming that all human beings need salvation, Christians are driven to share the good news of Jesus Christ with every person. Similarly, Muslims believe that every human being must face Allah on the Day of Judgment and that each will be judged based on the degree to which he or she surrendered to Allah and obeyed Allah's commandments. Therefore, because eternal life in heaven is desir-

able for all human beings, Muslims are driven to encourage all people to commit themselves to Allah.

Jesus Came “In the Fullness of Time”

In the First Century, the Roman Empire ruled over most of the known western world and the Roman Peace prevailed everywhere. Instead of focusing most of their human and economic resources on weapons and warfare, as has been true in most civilizations, including modern ones, the Roman and provincial governments were free to invest in benefiting their people. Throughout the provinces, Rome had developed a great system of roads, educational institutions, libraries, gymnasiums, sewer systems, public baths, beautiful public buildings, forums, shopping centers, and other benefits for the general public welfare.

For most people in the First Century, life was peaceful, prosperous, and morally decadent. With leisure time for thoughtfulness about the meaning of life, more and more people were questioning the validity of their pagan religions, seeking a more meaningful religious involvement, and yearning for higher ethical standards. Much of society was caught up in a new quest for salvation.

In Palestine, Judaism had reached a crisis. The Temple priesthood and the aristocratic Sadducees were in collaboration with the Roman overlords and growing wealthy while the general public was heavily burdened with a variety of taxes and assorted Temple fees. In the countryside, the Pharisaic movement had grown substantially, placing extreme emphasis on the concept of salvation being earned through rigid adherence to a multitude of religious rules. And, in both the urban and rural areas, Jewish terrorist movements like the Zealots and Sicarri were gaining more and more support for violently overthrowing both the Roman occupying forces and the Jewish aristocracy.

Into this world that was ripe for new hope came the word that a Galilean rabbi had taught a noble new ethic, had announced the coming kingdom of God, and, when he had been crucified, had risen from the grave! The idea soon spread across the Mediterranean basin that Jesus had died as a sacrifice for the sins of all humankind and that trust in this fact automatically provided salvation to believers.

The hunger for salvation and a new ethic that existed everywhere brought acceptance. The massive system of good roads coupled with worldwide peace and a thriving economy that allowed substantial travel helped to spread the new ideas. In less than a hundred years after the death of Jesus, Christianity was thriving in virtually every corner of the Roman

struggle or holy war.

Therefore, there are two broad meanings of Jihad: the violent struggle for the reformation of society and the non-violent struggle for personal holiness. Muhammad defined the first of these as the “lesser” jihad and the second as the “greater” jihad because he considered the struggle to follow the will of God by combating one’s ego, selfishness, and greed to be more important and more difficult than the struggle against the enemies of Islam.

In the modern resurgence of fundamentalism, the jihad to defend Islam against oppression and imperialism has become a battle cry to recruit young militants into the radical fundamentalist organizations and convince them to participate in sacrificial acts of terrorism such as suicide bombings through the promise of martyrdom and virtual sainthood.

Reflection Questions:

1. *What situations do you consider valid for persons of faith to enter into warfare?*
2. *Are there any circumstances in which violence can be justified?*
3. *What do you think is the solution to the growing levels of violence between the Islamic fundamentalist and Western governments? What can Christians do to change the situation?*

the fundamentalist groups, on the one hand, but clearly made them more popular, on the other. The only fundamentalist terrorists in Iraq prior to the American and British invasion were those that were trying to get rid of Saddam Hussein and his secular Baathist government. But, the invasion clearly caused significant anti-Western fundamentalism to flourish where none existed before.

The Quran and Islamic Law clearly prohibits the killing of noncombatants even when the cause is considered just and leading Islamic clerics have consistently denounced terrorism against noncombatants. However, terrorist acts against occupational forces (in Israel and Iraq, for instance) have been judged by many clerics to be acts designed to liberate Muslims from imperialist aggression and have, therefore, been judged to be legitimate under Islamic Law.

Holy War and Jihad

The concepts of Holy War and Jihad are confusing to many Christians. In the earliest years of Christianity, war was considered an absolute taboo. Christians were not allowed to be members of the military and war was considered to be an evil that could never be justified. Then, after Christianity became the established religion of the Roman Empire, theologians developed the concept of a “just war” that has pretty well dominated Christian thinking ever since.

In the Christian concept of a Just War, the ultimate aim must be peace, the war must be in defense of one’s own nation or another nation that is under attack, it must be waged by legitimate authority and involve a declaration of war, the purpose and motive of the war must be just, war must always be the last resort, non combatants must be protected, and only the minimum force needed to achieve the aims of the war must be used. In actuality, this is exactly the same ideology behind the Jewish and Islamic concepts of Holy War except they would add that the cause must be in defense of the faithful rather than in defense of a nation state and that participants in the war will receive special benefit in the afterlife.

Jihad means “to strive or struggle” and it is considered by many to be the Sixth Pillar of Islam. The Quran commands Muslims “to struggle in the path of God and in the example of the Prophet Muhammad and his early companions.” Jihad pertains to the struggle of living a good life, struggling against evil in oneself, trying to be virtuous and moral, striving to do good works, and helping to reform the evils in society. And, sometimes reforming society’s evils means fighting injustice and oppression, spreading and defending Islam, and creating a just society through armed

Empire and by the Third Century, it was the dominant religion.

Muhammad Came “In the Fullness of Time”

Seventh Century Arabia was also ripe for change. The Near East was divided between two great empires, the Byzantine Empire (Eastern Roman) in the west and the Sasanian Empire (neo-Persian) in the east. Both of these large empires had official religions: the Byzantines were Christian and the Persians were Zoroastrian. In addition, large populations of Jews were scattered throughout both empires and all three of these major religions were monotheistic and had divinely inspired Scriptures.

The primary religions of the Arabs were animistic cults in which divine powers were attributed to a variety of natural objects such as the sun, the moon, sacred rocks, trees, etc. In addition, many of the nomadic tribes had developed portable gods that could be taken on their migrations and, in some cases, venerated ancestors had been elevated to divine status. However, the Arabs also worshipped one “high god” they called Allah. Even though Allah was merely one of many Gods, he was considered to be above and apart from all the others. In addition, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism all existed in varying degrees throughout Arabia and more and more Arabs were becoming interested in these monotheistic Scriptural religions, in part because they admired their more sophisticated cultures.

Virtually everything in Arab culture evolved around the tribes and the dominant tribe was the Quraysh of Mecca. The Quraysh had become rich through its trading enterprises and Mecca had become a thriving mercantile city as well as the primary cultic center for the worship of Allah and other tribal deities. However, in the Seventh Century, the Quraysh tribe’s aggressive pursuit of wealth had cost it many of the tribal values that had held it together for generations. The gap between the wealthy clans and the poor clans of the tribe was widening and there was growing uneasiness about the inequities of life in and around Mecca. In addition, constant tribal warfare left nearly every family mourning losses and the harsh desert climate meant that many Arabs constantly lived on the verge of starvation.

In this world that was hungry for religious meaning and higher ethical standards, a businessman began to call people to surrender their lives to the idea that “There is no God but Allah!” And, in less than a century, more people were united under one banner than at any other time in history.

Reflection Questions:

1. *Why do you believe that Islam is currently growing faster in the world than Christianity?*
2. *Even though Christianity and Islam have much in common, members of both religions seem to be more familiar with the other's differences than with their similarities. Why do you think this is true?*
3. *Jesus and Muhammad both came at what seems to have been the very best of times for new religious expression. Do you believe God chose these as special times for revelation or were the times such that some new religion was likely to appear?*

torial wars between nation states but they had distinct religious overtones. The several wars between the Arab states and Israel over the last few decades have also been fueled by religious zeal.

As the Islamic world emerged from the devastation of colonialism, a new phenomenon developed. Colonialism left the people of Islam broken, humiliated, and impoverished. What had been a proud, powerful, independent, and affluent empire was reduced to a dependent cluster of nation states with many of their borders having been arbitrarily defined by Western powers with little concern for ancient tribal areas or ethnic divisions. Many Muslims blamed the disaster of colonialism on the unfaithfulness of their leaders and their attempts to mimic Western nations.

Out of this came a widely held belief that Islam must return to its roots and this belief is gradually producing a new vitality in Islam around the world. More and more people are finding renewed hope through a return to the basics of Islam including a shunting of Western ideologies. This has resulted in a few totally Islamic states such as Iran (Shiite) and Saudi Arabia (Wahabbi Sunni), in which Shariah has become the law of the land. It has also brought about a significant growth in orthodox Islam in secular states such as Egypt and Turkey where Shariah is being gradually imposed by cultural pressures but not by the governments.

Most important, however, this resurgence has spawned a variety of radical fundamentalist sects such as the Armed Islamic Group in Algeria, the Islamic Jihad in Egypt, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia, Ansar al-Islam in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan. These groups are very difficult to define because most of them began as religious, political, and charitable groups aimed at cleansing Islam of secular leaders and returning it to its purist form. However, like most liberation movements (including Americans in ousting the British from the colonies, Israelis in ousting the British from Israel, the IRA in trying to oust the British from Northern Ireland, and assorted African and South American liberation groups), they have gradually turned to terrorism against the governments they are trying to overthrow. And, in cases such as Al Qaeda, this terrorism has extended to anyone they believe is oppressing Islam in any way, which includes the United States, European states, and secular Islamic governments.

Official mainstream Islam clearly denounces the terrorist activities of these fundamentalist groups just as much as Westerners but the groups also generate considerable pride among many rank and file Muslims who feel they represent the only way of stopping the imperialism of the West. American attacks on the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan damaged

replaced, they still view the 2003 invasion of Iraq by American and British forces to be another Christian preemptive attack against Islam for imperialist purposes.

Even though the New Testament teaches peacefulness and tolerance of others, even reaching out to enemies in love, Christians also accept the Old Testament that certainly calls for violence against others in the cause of religion. Modern liberal Christians believe the coming of Jesus as described in the New Testament was a “corrective” to the understanding of God in the Old Testament but conservative Christians tend to see both testaments as binding on Christians. Therefore, they tend to exhibit more intolerance toward other religions and more quickly endorse military action. Extreme fundamentalist Christians such as the Ku Klux Klan, racist organizations, and survivalist groups have always endorsed violence in varying degrees.

Islam’s history of violence seems more volatile to Christians because it is endorsed by the Quran as part of Islam and, especially, because of the rise in Islamic fundamentalism and the terrorist acts of recent years. Even though Islam is far from the fanatical and intolerant military society that has become a part of Western mythology, it certainly has a history of violence that parallels that of Christianity.

Militarism has always been a part of Islam. The Quran permits the use of force in self-defense or the defense of Islam and, in some circumstances, it requires it. Islam was born into one of the world’s most violent societies and, in fact, it brought much of the Arabian tribal feuding, raiding, and killing under control by uniting the tribes under the single banner of Islam. But, it did not end the military society that was so much a part of Arabic life. When the new Islamic community came under attack by the pagan tribes, it responded militarily and was victorious. When the new Islamic community needed resources, it resorted to ghazu (raids) against non-Muslim caravans. As the Islamic Empire expanded over the next several decades to become history’s largest empire under one rule, much of the expansion was through the strength of its new religious ideas. However, it is also clear that much of the expansion was also due to Islam’s growing military power.

Just as secular rulers of predominantly Christian nations have used Christianity as a justification for military aggression and imperialism, so have leaders of Muslim countries. Modern wars such as those between Iraq (secular state with a predominantly Islamic population) and Iran (Shiite Islamic state) and between Pakistan (Islamic state) and India (secular state with a Hindu majority and Islamic minority) were largely terri-

Chapter Two: Jesus and Muhammad, the Early Years

Jesus of Nazareth and Muhammed of Mecca are listed by many historians as the two most influential persons in the history of the world. Today, more than half of the population of the world is identified as being their followers and most people in other religions are somewhat familiar with them.

Information about their lives prior to the beginning of their ministries is sketchy. For Jesus, there is only the information about his birth in the first two chapters of Matthew and the first two chapters of Luke plus some stories in apocryphal writings that were created as much as seven centuries after his death. For Muhammad, there is a vast body of material, called Hadith, which is the collective memory of the events and sayings of Muhammad and his companions but it is also pretty thin for the period of time prior to the beginning of his ministry. There are striking similarities in the lives and teachings of the two men but there are also some significant differences.

Jesus Prior to the Beginning of His Ministry

Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea approximately 4 BC. His father, Joseph, was a carpenter who originally came from Bethlehem but who had settled in the Galilean town of Nazareth and his mother, Mary, was a

teenager from Nazareth. Mary and Joseph had entered into the traditional Jewish engagement period of approximately one year in which the woman remained with her parents and cohabitation was prohibited. However, they were legally betrothed to be married and dissolution of the contract was only possible through a formal divorce.

During this betrothal period, Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel who told her she would become pregnant through an act of the Holy Spirit, that she would give birth to a son that she would name Jesus, and that he would be known as the Son of God. When Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant even though they had not had sexual relations, he set out to quietly divorce her from the betrothal until, in a dream, an angel visited him to explain Mary's pregnancy.

Three months into her pregnancy, Mary traveled to help her aged aunt Elizabeth in the village of Ein Karem a few miles west of Jerusalem. Elizabeth was also pregnant and gave birth to John the Baptist shortly after the arrival of Mary. It is likely that Mary stayed on to help her aged aunt and to avoid the scandal that would have erupted if her pregnancy had become known back in Nazareth.

Near the time that Mary was to deliver, Joseph took her to Bethlehem (probably from Ein Karem, just four miles away) because a census had been called by the Roman government requiring everyone to go to the town of their birth to be enrolled for tax purposes. The town was so full of people returning for the census that both the hotels and the homes of Joseph's family were already full and Mary and Joseph had to spend the night in a cave in the hillside beneath the city that was used as a stable for domestic animals.

Jesus was born in the stable and, after being wrapped in birthing clothes, he was placed in an animal feed trough. In connection with the birth of Jesus, angels appeared to a group of shepherds near Bethlehem and told them of the birth. They traveled to the cave and visited Mary, Joseph and the new baby, Jesus.

At some time after the birth of Jesus, the Holy Family moved from the cave to a house in Bethlehem, probably a residence of one of Joseph's relatives. Jesus was circumcised at the Bethlehem synagogue and the family traveled to Jerusalem to complete the required rituals of dedicating their firstborn and cleansing Mary.

About this time, a group of Magi from somewhere in the East arrived in Jerusalem after following a new star they had discovered. They met with King Herod the Great and then, they followed the star to Bethlehem, visited the Holy Family in the house and presented the baby with gifts of

that the Quran expressly calls them to religious toleration, that there is virtually no history of racism in Islamic society, and that Christian minorities in Islamic cultures have historically been treated better than Islamic minorities in Christian nations.

However, both Christians and Muslims tend to emphasize their focus on peace and play down their violent natures that have, over the centuries, caused millions of deaths and vast devastation. Historically, Christians have certainly been more aggressive toward Muslims than Muslims have been toward Christians but the modern growth of violent fundamentalism in Islam is disturbing to both Christians and Muslims.

The Christian Crusades were specifically promoted as an attempt to drive the "infidel Muslims" out of the holy lands and because the Crusaders identified everyone wearing Eastern clothing as Muslims, they ended up killing more Byzantine Christians and Eastern Jews than they did Muslims. When they actually collided with the Islamic Empire, the Crusaders encountered a sophisticated culture that was better educated, more militarily sophisticated, and significantly more tolerant of other religions than were the Crusaders. The Crusaders did two things, however, that significantly changed history. First, when they were driven out of the Middle East, they brought back to Europe a vast new understanding of science, mathematics, and the arts that launched the Renaissance and brought Europe out of the dark ages. Second, they posited in the Islamic mind the idea that Christians were eager to launch preemptive attacks on Muslims without any cause other than their desire for Muslim land and resources.

The second great attack on the Islamic Empire by Christians – colonialism – was more successful militarily, even though eventually it also failed. Most Christians would argue that the colonialism of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, which so devastated and humiliated the Muslim world, was a secular undertaking, not a Christian one. Because Muslims do not understand any separation between economics, politics, and religion, the imperialism of the colonial period is seen as a second major preemptive Christian invasion of the Islamic world.

Similarly, Muslims view the massive devastation of the two World Wars involving European and North American countries primarily as internecine Christian conflicts. Again, even though Christians would argue that the World Wars had nothing to do with religion, Muslims say they are proof of the Christian inclination toward the use of violence and warfare to solve problems. Even though most Muslims were aware of the brutality of Iraq's Baathist government and believed it needed to be

Chapter Twelve: Violence and Warfare

Violence and warfare represent significant points of tension between Christians and Muslims because adherents of both religions understand themselves to be the arbiters of peace and the other religion to be prone toward violence. And, history has shown that the adherents of both religions have an unusual propensity toward violence both between members of their own religious cultures and toward members of other religions.

Christians are quick to point to Jesus as a man of peace who never harmed anyone and died sacrificially for the benefit of others. To this, they contrast the life of Muhammad who was a general as well as a religious leader. They point out that the New Testament has virtually no information about how to conduct warfare while the Quran has explicit instructions about warfare. Christians argue that they are called to lives of peace and love, converting others to the faith through their witness to Christ's love while Muslims are called to "holy war" converting others to their faith through the threat of violence.

Muslims point to the many Quranic phrases calling for mercy and justice and the overall tone of the Quran calling for the pursuit of peace. They show that even when the Quran makes references to warfare, it urges them to offer peace instead of combat, to fight only in defensive situations, to respond to attacks only in proportion to the amount of violence extended toward them, and to protect noncombatants, innocent civilians, women, children, and clergy of other religions. Muslims also point out

gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Because they feared Herod, the Magi returned to their own country via another route. Then, Joseph had another dream in which an angel warned him that Herod wanted to kill the new baby and Mary, Joseph and Jesus fled south into Egypt. They stayed there for approximately 2 years until the death of Herod and then they returned to Nazareth.

When Jesus was twelve, he went to Jerusalem with his family for Passover and amazed the scholars at the Temple with his religious knowledge and the depth of his questioning. Nothing else is known about Jesus until he appeared as a preacher/teacher/healer operating out of the fishing village of Capernaum two decades later.

We can presume that he spent time in the synagogue schools and, later, as a "graduate" student studying under one or more of the rabbis which means he probably spoke and read both Aramaic and Hebrew. There is no indication that he was literate in either Greek or Latin, the other two languages that were in use where he lived. Even though his primary profession was as a rabbi (scholarly teacher), it is likely that he also functioned as a carpenter until he gathered enough students to support him.

There is no record that Jesus was ever married or romantically involved throughout his lifetime even though it was decidedly unusual for a 30-year old rabbi to be unmarried. He was the oldest of four brothers – James, Joseph, Simon and Judas – and at least two unnamed sisters. His brother James became the leader of the early church in Jerusalem after his death and his brother Judas is believed by some to be the author of Jude in the New Testament.

Muhammad Prior to the Beginning of His Ministry

Muhammad ibn Abd Allah was born in what was then the small Arabian town of Mecca around 570 A.D. However, Islamic tradition does not provide any miraculous details about his birth. His family belonged to the once-prominent Hashim clan of the Quraysh tribe that dominated Mecca and the surrounding area. His name, Muhammad, means "highly praised" and, since the Sixth Century, more male children have been named Muhammad than any other name in the world.

Muhammad's early years were filled with sorrow and poverty. His father, Abdullah, died before he was born and his mother, Amina, died when he was six years old. After the death of his mother, Muhammad lived first with his grandfather, Abd al-Muttalib, and then came under the guardianship of his paternal uncle, Abu Talib, who was a businessman and head of the Hashim clan.

However, the Hashim clan had suffered serious reverses of fortune and Muhammad was trusted to a Bedouin nurse, Halima, and spent most of his childhood as an impoverished shepherd. Muhammad had a warm relationship with his adoptive family, however, and he was described as having a sweet and gentle disposition. His losses and poverty seem to have made him intensely sensitive to human suffering and committed to reach out to help others, especially the poor and weak. His sense of honor, duty and fidelity eventually won him many titles such as “The True” and “The Trustworthy One.”

However, even though he was a loving and giving child, Muhammad also became disgusted at the immorality, horrified at the constant violence, and ashamed of the treatment of women in Sixth Century Arabian society. As he grew into manhood, these concerns would begin to shape him more and more.

As a teenager, Muhammad began working with the trade caravans that traveled from Mecca north into Syria and south into Yemen. He soon showed himself to be honest and intelligent and he earned respect both for his business acumen and his involvement in the religious activities of the Quraysh tribe. Islamic tradition also records that, as he was growing into manhood, Muhammad developed a practice of withdrawing to secluded spots for prolonged periods of meditation and prayer.

As a young man, Muhammad became the manager of a trading company owned by the widow, Khadijah. Later, at age 25, he married Khadijah who was several years his senior and they had six children of whom four girls survived. One of these daughters, Fatimah, later married Abu Talib’s son, Ali, who eventually became the fourth Caliph of the Islamic Empire and the highly revered first Imam of Shi’ite Islam.

Muhammad and Khadijah had a very happy marriage which remained monogamous even though the pattern in Arabia at the time was for men to have multiple wives. Later, when Muhammad became a tribal chieftain, he had a harem of wives and concubines. His favorite wife was Aisha, the daughter of Muhammad’s closest friend Abu Bakr who later became the first Caliph after the death of Muhammad. Most of these marriages were politically motivated to build alliances with other tribes and others were to provide support for older women who had lost their husbands.

Until Muhammad was 40, he lived a reasonably quiet life as a prosperous businessman, a beloved husband and father, and a respected member of the community of Mecca. Then, during one of his meditations in the hills, the angel Gabriel visited him and launched a career that ultimately impacted most of the world.

divorce in some cultures, allows female circumcision in a few North African countries, prohibits women from driving in places like Saudi Arabia, and bars them from working in a few countries.

Still, the Muslim world is going through massive change with regard to these traditional roles. Western-type modernization is going on in many societies at the same time that people are turning back to their Muslim roots and this causes strange contradictions. In Saudi Arabia and Iran, for instance, women must be veiled in public and are severely segregated from men and yet they are a majority in the universities and many are business and land owners.

Reflection Questions:

1. *To what degree do you think culture is a reflection of religion and religion is a reflection of culture in your own world and in the Islamic world?*
2. *Many Islamic women believe that Western women are oppressed by a culture that puts too much stress on youth, beauty and sexuality. What do you believe about this?*
3. *Christianity is 2,000 years old and women are just now gaining levels of equality and freedom and Islam is only 1,300 years old and is already experiencing similar changes. Do you think that women could, ultimately, gain equality faster in the Muslim world than in the Christian world?*

The “veiling” of Islamic women to emphasize modesty is common in most Islamic societies even though it is required in only a few. The practice did not become widespread in the Islamic empire until four centuries after the death of Muhammad. Prior to that time, upper class women in Christian, Persian and Arab societies all wore veils as a sign of status rather than as a means of protecting modesty.

The Quran emphasizes modesty but it does not contain any prescriptions requiring specific clothing for women. It says that Islamic women should lower their gaze, guard their modesty, draw their veils over their bosoms, and not display their beauty. However, it also calls men to lower their gaze and be modest. The specific dress chosen by women or required of women in fundamentalist societies varies considerably from place to place. The burqa required of women in Afghanistan under the Taliban covered everything on the body except the eyes while the chador worn by Shiite women in Iran and Iraq and the hijab worn by the more conservative Sunni women leave the face, hands, and feet exposed while covering everything else.

It is a mistake to assume that either the public separation of the sexes or the veiling of women in Islamic societies is always something forced on them by patriarchal culture and fundamentalist religion. While this is, in fact, true in some areas, in other areas there is a resurgence of modern Islamic women choosing to wear the hijab and enforce separation as expressions of their faith and symbols of liberation and womanhood. They argue that wearing the hijab and remaining separate from men in public frees them from Western imperialist traditions that abuse women by forcing them to wear uncomfortable and undignified clothing, treating them as sexual objects, and defining them on the basis of sexual attraction rather than their intelligence, faithfulness, or creativity.

However, there are still many restrictions on women in Muslim society that are difficult for Christians to accept. Even though Muslim men can marry Christians or Jews because they are “People of the Book,” Muslim women must marry a Muslim or someone who converts to Islam. In Islamic society, the man is considered the head of the household and the woman’s religion is expected to be the same as his to guarantee that the children will also be Muslim. Because Muslims live in predominantly male-dominated cultures, domestic violence toward women is still a problem even though it is firmly forbidden by the Quran and there is zero evidence that Muhammad himself was anything but kind, loving and gentle toward his wives and children. The same power of ancient patriarchal societies also overrides the Quranic protection of women’s rights in

Reflection Questions:

1. *Why do you think the New Testament has elaborate stories in two Gospels about the birth of Jesus but virtually no information about his life for the next thirty years?*
2. *Jesus was a scholarly man who produced no writings and Muhammad was an illiterate man who produced the Quran, one of the most widely published books in history. What does this mean to you?*
3. *There is no record of Jesus being romantically involved with anyone but Muhammad had several wives? How do you feel about this?*

Chapter Three: Jesus and Muhammad, the Ministry Years

Around age 30, Jesus was baptized by his cousin John the Baptist and began a ministry of preaching, teaching and healing in the rural Jewish tetrarchy of Galilee. At age 40, Muhammad was meditating in a cave on the summit of Mount Hira, just outside Mecca, when the angel Gabriel visited him and he began reciting the first words of the Quran. For both men, these moments were the beginning of careers that would change the world.

The Early Ministry of Jesus

Jesus began his ministry by presenting himself to be baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River just north of where the river flows into the Dead Sea. John had been preaching that “someone greater” than he would be coming and, when he baptized Jesus, “the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”

After his baptism, Jesus retreated into the desert hill country where he fasted and was tempted by the devil for forty days. Filled with the Holy Spirit and fresh from withstanding great temptations, Jesus returned to Galilee where he began to gather students, preach the imminent coming

In modern Muslim societies the role of women varies considerably from one society to another. In the overwhelming majority of Islamic countries, women have the right to public primary, secondary and college-level education but in the few societies dominated by fundamentalist groups, education for women is very limited or banned. In most Muslim countries, women are allowed to work outside the home, vote, own businesses, and hold public office. In the mosques, women pray at the same time as the men, teach Quran classes, run independent auxiliaries and hold important offices. Four major Islamic countries (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey, and Indonesia) have had women prime ministers or presidents. But, again, gains for women in religious, economic, and public life are severely limited in countries dominated by both Sunni and Shiite fundamentalists.

When Islam came into being, it was common in the Arab world for men to have more than one wife and, as an important political and religious leader, Muhammad had several. The Quran allows a man to have up to four wives provided that he is able to support them and treat them equally. However, polygamy has been totally abolished in some Islamic countries and severely limited (requiring court action and approval of the existing wife) in most others. The vast majority of modern Muslims are monogamous even in those countries where polygamy is still allowed.

Two Islamic practices, however, continue to symbolize the subjugation of women for most Westerners: the physical separation of men and women in public and worship activities and the requirement for women to wear special clothing. Most Islamic societies practice some degree of segregation between men and women. In many mosques, for reasons of modesty, men and women are separated by a screen or curtain during prayer services and in virtually all mosques, women line up behind the men for prayer. Unmarried men and women do not mix except in very controlled situations such as family gatherings or with a chaperone and any touching between men and women other than married couples is offensive to Muslims.

Sexual segregation was not required or practiced in the earliest days of Islam although the Quran contains specific segregation and modesty requirements for the wives of Muhammad. Later, conservative Islamic scholars interpreted these requirements for Muhammad’s wives to be requirements for all Muslim women. In modern times, severe separation of the sexes is practiced by the most conservative groups such as the Wahabbi’s of Saudi Arabia, the Taliban, and many of the Shiite groups but the practice is declining in the more liberal societies.

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denominations are women and most of their seminaries now have more female than male students. Unless the current patterns change, women will eventually dominate the leadership of these denominations.

However, a substantial number of Christian communities around the world still practice significant gender bias. Most of the conservative Protestant bodies prohibit the ordination of women and many continue to bar women from leadership positions in local churches. The concept of female submission to male leadership in families also remains a strong concept in these conservative denominations. Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy – which make up roughly two thirds of all Christians worldwide – still bar women from the priesthood and, therefore, from other positions in the religious hierarchy. Therefore, equality of the sexes in leadership positions exists in only about 15-20% of Christian denominations and even this equality has only come about in the last few decades.

In areas of education, scholarship, legal rights, inheritance rights, business management, voting rights, equal employment, and access to financial resources, women in Western societies have made significant gains in the last few decades and all indications are that they will continue to gain over the next several decades. These are, for the most part, cultural changes in the Western societies rather than religious changes and similar changes for Christian women are coming much more slowly in other parts of the world.

The role of women in Islamic societies is just as complex as it is in Christian societies. In the earliest years of Islam, the new religion provided for a significant enhancement for women. Before Muhammad began preaching his new ethic, women were considered little more than chattel in the pagan Arab world and not much better in the Christian Byzantine Empire. The attitudes toward women were largely shaped by tribal societies in harsh desert environments where women were without any legal rights, regularly abused, and divorced on the whims of their husbands.

The Quran, however established a new understanding of the relationship between the sexes. It banned female infanticide, prohibited the legal concept of women as property, established legal rights for women, granted women the right to retain their own dowries, changed marriage from a proprietary to a contractual relationship, allowed women to retain control over their property and use their maiden names after marriage, guaranteed them financial maintenance from their husbands, and limited the legal reasons for divorce. And, most of these new rights were granted to Islamic women three to four centuries before they were granted in Christian cultures.

Session Three: Jesus and Muhammad, the Ministry Years

of the kingdom of God, teach a new kind of faith to both his students and larger crowds of followers, and perform miraculous healings and exorcisms.

He carried out his ministry primarily in the rural Roman tetrarchy of Galilee but traveled some into other nearby provinces of the Roman Empire. However, there is no indication in the gospels that, during the three years of his ministry, Jesus ever traveled any further than 100 miles from his hometown of Nazareth.

Jesus' twelve disciples were all Galileans except Judas Iscariot who was a Judean. Nearly half of the group were fishermen from Capernaum and the other villages nearby. One was a publican (tax collector) and one was a Zealot (revolutionary). Even though Jesus was a Jewish rabbi, he showed the same compassion for Gentiles and Samaritans as he did for Jews. Some of the close followers of Jesus were women who provided resources to the team of disciples and who were exceptionally loyal to him even when the disciples fled at the time of his death.

Much of the teaching of Jesus was in parables, stories that had both a perceived meaning and a symbolic meaning. Sometimes the parables were patently clear so they communicated complex ideas quickly to the rural people of Galilee. But, at other times, they were obscure and required translation by Jesus.

In addition to teaching in parables, Jesus sometimes spoke in long monologues, sometimes answering specific questions, and sometimes preaching in an apocalyptic style. Most of these teaching/speaking styles were different from the traditional style of the scholarly rabbis of his time because he spoke original ideas with authority rather than quoting scholars from the past. The accepted way in which the rabbis underscored their teaching with authority was to quote from the accumulated wisdom of the chain of rabbis going back to the time of the great prophets. Jesus, however, boldly taught new ideas as if they came direct from God with few references to this traditional chain of authority.

The focus of Jesus' teaching was the kingdom of God which he said was dawning with his arrival in Palestine but was also to be expected at some time in the future. Most of the parables of Jesus were illustrations about the coming kingdom of God.

Jesus also taught a totally new way of looking at ethics and morality. The accepted understanding of ethics and morality was defined in terms of rigidly following a multitude of rules contained in both the Jewish written law found in the Torah and the oral law transmitted through the chain of rabbis. Jesus said that the motivation behind an act was more important

than the act itself and that the primary motivation behind morality and ethics was the commandment to love God with all your heart and soul and to love your neighbor, including your enemies, as much as you love yourself.

With regard to the divine nature of Jesus, it is almost impossible to sort out the difference between what Jesus actually said and what was placed in the text as a matter of faith by the First Century Christian authors. Even though Jesus was frequently evasive about being identified as the Messiah and the Son of God, he did affirm both titles directly from time to time. He clearly was not, however, the militaristic Messiah that was the focus of most people's hopes.

The Early Ministry of Muhammad

As Muhammad grew into manhood, he became more and more concerned with the crudeness, superstitions, constant violence, greed, and abuses of the poor and powerless in the Quraysh tribe. But, he also had come to believe that Allah (The God), one of the gods worshipped by the Quraysh, was the only God, the creator, supreme provider, sustainer, and determiner of all human destiny.

He had begun to take retreats in a cave near the summit of Mount Hira just outside of Mecca where he would meditate on the mysteries of good and evil while focusing his prayers on Allah. Sometimes these vigils would last all night and as the presence of Allah became increasingly real and awesome, he came to believe that there was only one God, Allah, and that Allah was the same one God worshipped by the Christians and Jews.

On the 17th of the month of Ramadan in 610, Muhammad fell into a trance and was confronted by a powerful presence that he later identified as the archangel Gabriel. The angel said, "Proclaim!" and, when Muhammad resisted the angel squeezed him "to the end of his endurance." This took place three times until these words flowed from the Prophet:

Proclaim in the name of your Lord who created!
Created man from a clot of blood.
Proclaim! The Lord is the most generous,
Who teaches by the pen,
Teaches man what he knew not. *Quran 96.1-3*

These were the first words of the Quran. Over the next 21 years, Muhammad – who could neither read nor write – received hundreds of messages from Gabriel, which he then repeated to others who wrote them

tries are frequently viewed as Christian invasions rather than actions of secular governments. There is widespread belief in Islamic cultures that Christians (Westerners) want to reshape Eastern society to be the same as Western society and they see many things about the West that are offensive to both their religion and their culture.

One of the common misconceptions about Islam in the minds of most Westerners is that its adherents are all illiterate and poor. Many believe that it flourishes only in backward, Southern Hemisphere nations and that it would die out if these nations became modern, industrialized, democratic nations driven by media, nationalism, and success-oriented goals. In fact, when Christian Europe was in the "dark ages" for nearly a thousand years, the Islamic empire flourished as a significantly more progressive society. Islamic scientists, artists, poets, architects, engineers, educators, mathematicians, and theologians were far ahead of their counterparts in the West for several hundred years. In fact, most historians credit the rebirth of the sciences and arts during the European Renaissance to the influx of knowledge that came back with the returning Crusaders after their failed attacks on the Islamic world.

However, the period of European industrialization followed by the Eighteenth Century imperialist thrust of European nations into the Islamic world was devastating to the culture of Islam. The Western colonialists assumed that it was necessary for the entire Islamic world to become Westernized, Christianized, and nationalized and for two hundred years, the economy and culture of the Islamic world suffered defeat, decay, and humiliation under colonial control. Today, Islamic culture is going through its own renaissance as it emerges from Western domination and struggles to find its identity in a modern, post-colonial world.

The Role of Women

The role of women in Islamic culture is one of the first differences to which most Western Christians point when they articulate the things that are different about Islam. In fact, the place of women in Islamic society varies considerably from country to country and sect to sect just as it does in Christian society. And, even though the role of women in most Christian denominations has moved substantially toward equality in the last few decades, it took nearly 2,000 years for that to happen and similar movements are happening much faster in some Islamic societies.

In Christianity, Protestant centrist and liberal denominations have finally eliminated all technical barriers for women in leadership positions. A growing number of pastors, bishops, and church bureaucrats in these

Chapter Eleven: Culture and the Role of Women

Many of the differences between American Christians and the Muslims of Africa, Asia and the Middle East have more to do with culture than religion. In fact, there is no distinctive Islamic clothing because it changes from area to area. There is no required covering for women because it changes from area to area. There is no requirement for head covering or beards for men because it changes from area to area. In many of the predominantly Muslim areas that have Christian minorities, the Christians are largely indistinguishable from the Muslims in terms of daily life, clothing, and many of the attributes normally understood to be Muslim because these things are more ethnic than Islamic.

The attitudes of American and European Christians and Asian, African and Middle Eastern Muslims toward each other often focus more on cultural differences than religious differences. This confusion is exacerbated because Muslims living in isolation from the West believe that all of life is heavily influenced by religion including government actions, politics, family values, sexual attitudes, foods, business activities, military endeavors, and media. For example, the brutality of Western colonialism was seen by most Muslims as an attempt by Christians (instead of governments or businesses) to destroy their cultural and religious values. And, today, American and European military actions in Middle Eastern coun-

down to form the Quran. The fact that the illiterate Muhammad was able to produce one of the most theologically profound and poetically beautiful literary works in history is believed by Muslims to be absolute proof that the Quran is the actual words of God, not the writings of a man.

When Muhammad came down from the mountain after that first vision, he was frightened and bewildered. He told no one except his wife, Khadija, and her cousin, the Christian, Waraqa ibn Nawfal. They became convinced that Muhammad had received a direct revelation from God and encouraged him to begin preaching, which he did after two years.

In the beginning, Muhammad attracted only a small group of followers, mostly friends and family. His wife, Khadija, was his first and most loyal follower. She was soon joined by Muhammad's friend Abu Bakr, who would become Islam's first Caliph after the death of the Prophet, Muhammad's young cousin, Ali ibn Talib, who would later become Islam's fourth Caliph, and another merchant, Uthman ibn Affan.

Some of the new adherents were attracted by Muhammad's strong egalitarian ethic in which he preached that wealth should be shared with the poor and weak and that all persons should be treated with respect regardless of their station in life. This equality also extended to women to a degree unheard of in Seventh Century Arabia. He demanded that human beings behave toward one another with justice, equity and compassion and warned that all would be judged by Allah.

Others were attracted to the new religion by the sheer beauty of the Quran, which many recognized immediately as great art. Many of the new participants could neither read nor write so they began the practice of memorizing and reciting the Quran aloud, a practice that is still revered in Islam, and they quickly came to realize that it had a mesmerizing effect on people.

Muhammad did not believe he was starting a new religion, only that he was providing new revelations about the One God, Allah, to the Arabs of Mecca. However, the new group began to take on a totally new character and eventually came to be called "Islam" which means "surrender" and the followers were called "Muslims," persons who had surrendered their entire being to Allah.

The Growing Conflict

Both Jesus and Muhammad preached and taught a totally new way of life which soon brought them into conflict with the religious establishment of their times.

In the First Century, the Jewish rabbi, Jesus, announced that he was

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bringing a new sense of hope, a new ethic, and a new revelation from God to the Jewish people. And, the Jewish religious establishment immediately began to plot against him.

In the Seventh Century, Muhammad, member of the Arab Quraysh tribe, began preaching a new way of living based on revelation about the tribe's primary god, Allah. And, the Quraysh power structure immediately began to plot against him.

The way in which the two most important religious leaders in history responded to these conflicts has much to do with the shape of both Christianity and Islam today.

Reflection Questions:

1. *What parallels and differences in the primary ministry of Jesus and Muhammad seem most striking to you?*
2. *Both Jesus and Muhammad quickly elevated women to greater levels of equality and leadership than was common in the cultures in which they lived. What do you believe was the long term impact of this?*
3. *Why did the preaching and teaching of both Jesus and Muhammad bring them into conflict with the religious and secular leaders of their time?*

Session Ten: Primary Theological Beliefs

ly social, political or economic reasons and following the Islamic Law is, for them, more for show than for faith. However, it is neither easier nor more difficult to sort out the truly religious from the quasi-religious in Islam than it is in Christianity.

There are many areas of faith on which Christians and Muslims agree technically but, in practice, are far apart. The emphasis on angels in the Bible and the Islamic scriptures is almost identical. However, the belief in angels is a much stronger part of the faith of an average Muslim than an average Christian. Belief in Judgment Day and the allocation of persons to heaven or hell based on God's measurement of their life on earth is, again, defined in almost identical terms in Christian and Muslim doctrine but it is a much stronger aspect of individual belief for Muslims than it is for modern Christians. Both Christians and Muslim emphasize the need to provide assistance to the poor and others in need but, in practice, individual Muslims contribute more of their assets to assisting those in need than Christians.

Reflection Questions:

1. *Muslims talk about "fearing and obeying" God while Christians talk about "loving and obeying" God. What does this distinction mean to you?*
2. *How can you define your belief in the Trinity so that it does not sound like you believe in three gods?*
3. *What do you see as the primary difference between Christian belief in Jesus and Muslim belief in Muhammad?*

good society that God intends for every human being and every society and Muslims are called to live by this blueprint. It is the assurance that they will have a meaningful life while alive and entrance into heaven on Judgment Day.

Being obedient to Islamic Law is more, however, than simply following the rules about prayer, alms giving, fasting and pilgrimage. It includes specific rules regarding dress, foods, doing business, treatment of others, sexual relations, military activities, government, family matters, etc. Muslims are forbidden, for instance to sell, consume or purchase alcoholic beverages. They are not allowed to participate in gambling, to use narcotics, or to eat pork products. They are particularly sensitive about issues regarding human sexuality, which is totally restricted to the institution of marriage, and they are deeply offended by the amount of public sexuality, semi-nudity, pornography, and sexual innuendo that they believe to be rampant in Western society, particularly in the media.

The degree of rigidity in following Islamic Law differs from culture to culture. In pure Islamic countries in which Shariah is the law of the land (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, Sudan, Libya, etc.), it is relatively easy to follow Islamic Law because there is often no alternative. The use of alcohol, narcotics, and pork are against the law, women are required to dress modestly, public touching between the sexes is prohibited, and the government prohibits gambling, pornography, and western media. In addition, in a totally Islamic society, significant legal and social pressure exists to keep persons rigidly within the strictures of Shariah.

However, in countries in which Muslims are a minority (the United States and most European countries) or in Islamic states with secular legal systems (Egypt, Turkey, Iraq before the American invasion, etc.), the pressures to become negligent about Islamic Law are a constant problem for faithful Muslims. Participating in prayer five times a day, worshipping at noon on Fridays, avoiding consuming pork products even accidentally, fasting during Ramadan, avoiding places where alcoholic beverages are consumed, celebrating Muslim festivals, avoiding physical contact with the opposite sex, and wearing special clothing are all significantly more difficult in these cultures. However, many Muslims argue that strict adherence to Islamic Law as a means of gaining God's love and grace is a much more meaningful pursuit when it is voluntary than when it is enforced by an Islamic government.

Still, Muslims are no different from Christians in that some members of the faith are more deeply religious and practice their religion because of their faith. Also like Christians, some Muslims are adherents for pure-

Chapter Four: Jesus and Muhammad, the Conflicts

Both Jesus and Mohammed brought a totally new way of thinking about God and a revolutionary new ethic to their world. And, in both cases, their new ideas threatened the religious and political establishments and generated severe conflicts. The way in which they responded to these conflicts distinctly sets the two men apart and has characterized the tone of the two religions ever since.

Jesus' Conflict With Jewish Authorities

The first significant sign of conflict against Jesus and his followers in the gospels was when Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, was arrested and imprisoned at Machaerus Castle near the Dead Sea by Tetrarch Herod Antipas. John had openly preached about Herod's immorality because of his marriage to Herodias who had been first been married to Antipas' brother, Philip. Later, to fulfill a rash promise made to Herodias' daughter, Salome, Herod had John beheaded. Soon, some Pharisees warned Jesus that Herod Antipas wanted to kill him and Jesus' reaction was to call Herod, "That fox!"

While Jesus was still in Galilee, more and more scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees began to show up wherever he was preaching, healing, or teaching. Most of them had probably been sent by the Sanhedrin, the pri-

mary court of Judaism in Jerusalem, to investigate what Jesus was doing and saying. In Jerusalem, it gradually became clear to the High Priest, Caiaphas, the retired High Priest, Annas, and other officers of the court that Jesus had to be eliminated. They feared that Jesus' preaching would stir up the people so much that they would turn against the religious establishment.

Several times, they sent out groups of Temple police and soldiers to capture Jesus but, each time he escaped. Then, a few weeks before Passover, probably in the spring of the year 29, Jesus fled from Jerusalem to an area east of the Jordan River after the Jewish leadership tried first to stone him and then have him arrested for blasphemy because he had announced, "The Father and I are one ... the Father is in me and I am in the Father."

A few weeks later, Jesus returned to the Jerusalem area to perform an ultimate act of healing by raising his beloved friend Lazarus who had been dead for four days. Many Jewish leaders witnessed the resurrection of Lazarus and, more importantly, witnessed the response of the many people who came to believe in Jesus because of this event.

The concerns of the Jewish leadership accelerated and they sought again to have him arrested, tried, and executed. The High Priest Caiaphas said to the high court, the Sanhedrin, "It is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." But, Jesus eluded his pursuers again and escaped with his disciples to Ephraim on the edge of the desert wilderness.

Then, Jesus and his disciples returned to the Jerusalem area six days before Passover. When they were spotted at the residence of Lazarus in the suburb of Bethany, the Jerusalem Jewish leaders plotted to have both Jesus and Lazarus arrested. However, because of Passover, the population in Jerusalem had swollen with pilgrims to ten times its normal size and the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, had moved into the city with a legion of soldiers from Caesarea to keep order. The Jewish leadership was concerned that, because of Jesus' growing popularity, a public arrest might start riots.

The situation was further exacerbated, however, when Jesus made a dramatic entry into Jerusalem on the foal of a donkey, a symbol that was understood by the crowd as an announcement that he was, indeed, the long expected Messiah. The people believed that a Messiah would come who would be in the lineage of King David, would be a powerful general with divine power, and would drive out the Roman occupying forces as well as the religious and aristocratic Jewish leadership. The crowd identi-

Salvation

The core theological principle of Christianity is that, in some way, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus set in motion the possibility for the salvation of every human being who accepts the truth of the principle. The basic nature of human beings is to turn toward ourselves and away from God's love, a condition which we call "sin." But, God's love for us is never ending and, because of this love, God acted in the person of Jesus Christ to provide us with redemption from our basic human condition. Through our faith that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ can set us free, our past is forgiven and we are restored into a loving relationship with God. This loving relationship with God brings about a more meaningful life and the guarantee of a continuous loving relationship with God after death.

In addition, most Christians believe that, following the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, God returned to earth in the form of the Holy Spirit, a manifestation of God who surrounds us and lives within each of us for guidance and empowerment. The Holy Spirit is the presence of God in our lives that we sense from day to day and who aids us in living out our lives as faithful servants.

Christians, therefore, describe the Godhead as one being in three persons, the Trinity of God, Son, and Holy Spirit. This concept of the same God revealed to us in three different ways is seen by Muslims to be polytheism, a serious deviation from the straight path of monotheism.

The Quran says, "If you love Allah, then follow me, and Allah will love you and forgive you your sins; and Allah is forgiving, a dispenser of grace." On the surface, this sounds very much like the Christian doctrine of salvation in which faith in the redemptive power of Jesus' death and resurrection brings about love, forgiveness and salvation. However, the understanding of the way in which God's grace flows to the individual is different in Islam.

Again, the difference centers on the fact that Christianity focuses more on beliefs while Islam is about actions. The way in which a Muslim gains God's grace, love and forgiveness is through perfect adherence to the Law of Islam (Shariah) as defined in the Quran and Hadith. Muslims believe that Allah's commands for human life and the social order were detailed specifically in the Quran and that those areas of life not covered in the Quran are carefully defined in the Hadith. Islamic Law is the concrete expression of Allah's will for human beings and it provides the guidance necessary for both individuals and society. It is a precise blueprint for the

important prophet of God before Muhammad but they see the concept that Jesus was God in human form as a violation of the absolute principle of God's oneness and indivisibility. For Muslims, the belief that there is only one God is so central to their faith that the idea of any being, including Jesus, being divine is a pagan abomination. Muslims also revere Mary, the mother of Jesus, and they often point out that Mary is mentioned more often in the Quran than she is in the New Testament.

The idea that Jesus, a great prophet, would have gone through the humiliation of being arrested, tried, convicted, and crucified as a common criminal is offensive to Muslims. They believe God simply made it appear that Jesus was crucified and then raised him into heaven. They see the execution of Jesus as failure and they do not believe that God could have allowed Jesus to fail.

Muslims view Muhammad as the last in a long line of prophets of God that includes figures such as Moses, Abraham, Noah, John the Baptist, and Jesus as well as some non-Biblical prophets from Arabian culture such as Hud and Salih. More important, Muslims view him as the last of three great "messengers" (Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad) through whom God revealed sacred scriptures.

Muslims believe implicitly that Muhammad was merely a man who lived as a perfect Muslim. They do not believe he was divine but they do believe he lived out God's revelation better than anyone else before or since. The Quran and Hadith do not have as many miraculous stories about Muhammad as the New Testament has about Jesus but one story, the tradition about his "Night Journey" to Jerusalem and heaven is certainly miraculous. After reciting the Quran near the Kabah, Muhammad was sleeping nearby when he was awakened by Gabriel and flown on a heavenly steed to Jerusalem where he met with a group of former prophets including Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Then, he and Gabriel climbed a heavenly ladder through Seven Heavens, each presided over by one or more of the former prophets, finally reaching the Throne of God. God told Muhammad that Muslims were to pray fifty times each day and Muhammad negotiated it down to five. This experience, celebrated annually by Muslims around the world, has been the subject of considerable debate by Islamic scholars as to whether it was a spiritual or bodily experience in much the same way that Christian theologians debate whether or not the resurrection, transfiguration, and temptation experiences of Jesus were bodily or spiritual.

fied Jesus as that Messiah, shouted "Hosanna!" and lined his path with their garments and palm fronds.

When Jesus arrived in the heart of the city surrounded by immense crowds, he went immediately to the Temple area to drive out the money-changers and merchants who were selling sacrificial animals. This was a direct attack on the abuses of the Temple sacrificial system that was the primary means of financial support for the Jewish leadership.

Because most of his followers had come to believe Jesus was the Messiah, they expected a confrontation with the authorities would end in Jesus using his power to destroy the Temple leadership, the Jewish aristocracy, and the Roman occupational forces. One of Jesus' closest disciples, Judas, a Judean and likely a member of one of the Zionist revolutionary groups like the Sicarii, betrayed Jesus to the Jewish leadership. It is probable that Judas believed that, if Jesus was arrested, it would force him to retaliate against the establishment.

However, Jesus had consistently told his followers that he was a different kind of Messiah than the one they expected. He was the "suffering servant" Messiah that had been predicted by Isaiah and he would suffer and die for the benefit of the people rather than go to war for them. He was arrested, tried, and found guilty of the capital crime of blasphemy by the Sanhedrin.

Because the Sanhedrin could not actually carry out an execution, Jesus was handed over to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, for execution. After some minor questioning by Pilate, Jesus was whipped, mocked, and marched to a hill outside the city walls where he was crucified along with two thieves. He died around three o'clock on Friday afternoon and, because the next day was the Sabbath, he was taken down from the cross and laid in a nearby tomb.

On Sunday morning, Jesus rose from the tomb. He made a variety of appearances before his followers in both Jerusalem and Galilee over the next forty days and then ascended into heaven.

Muhammad's Conflict With the Meccans

Just as the preaching of Jesus immediately put him in conflict with the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, Muhammad's preaching immediately put him in conflict with the Quraysh authorities in Mecca. Two primary aspects of his preaching and teaching threatened the power structures in Mecca.

Rigid Monotheism. The Quraysh believed that Allah was the High God but they also believed in a wide variety of pagan gods and 360 idols

were arranged around the Kabah, a huge cube-shaped shrine in Mecca. Muhammad emphasized that there was only one God, Allah, and that all the rest were non-existent and that any belief in them was detrimental to true faith. Because of this, Muhammad made his followers face Jerusalem when they prayed, turning their backs on the pagan Kabah. The economy of the Quraysh depended on pilgrims coming to the Kabah, the most important worship center in Arabia, and spending money to gain the favor of their favorite god or goddess. Muhammad's preaching against this was damaging the income of the Quraysh.

Eternal Life. Along with Christians and Jews, Muhammad preached that God would, ultimately, judge all humans. At the Last Judgment, they would be judged on the degree to which they followed the imperatives of the Quran, especially those that called for care of the poor and redistribution of wealth, not on their wealth or social status. The Quraysh believed that there was no such thing as life after death, no heaven or hell, and that only those things that would increase personal wealth and power in this life were of any value. The only ethic that mattered was loyalty to the tribe and its general values. So, Muhammad's emphasis on life after death, heaven and hell, and the Final Judgment was seen as a direct attack on both the revered traditions and the rampant capitalism of the Quraysh.

A New Ethic. Muhammad preached a significantly higher level of social responsibility than had ever been heard in the Arab world before. He called for moral reform covering the just treatment of the disadvantaged, orphans, the poor, the hungry, debtors, widows, travelers, slaves and other unfortunates. He called for the same loyalty and communal support that had been the hallmark of Arab tribal tradition to be extended to all followers of Allah, regardless of tribal membership. And, he called for tolerance of Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians because they were also "People of the Book" who had received revelation similar to what he had received. This insulted the traditions of the Quraysh as well as threatening their historic tribal structures, power base, and economic systems.

The Quraysh opposition to Muhammad intensified rapidly. They imposed a boycott on the small Muslim group, forbidding either intermarriage or commerce with them. The Muslims were not able to buy food and many of their businesses were ruined. After two years of the boycott, it was lifted but, almost immediately, Muhammad's uncle and protector, Abu Talib, died leaving the prophet in danger of being killed by the Quraysh.

At about this time, a delegation from the agricultural town of Yathrib, 250 miles north of Mecca, came to see Muhammad. The assortment of Arab and Jewish tribes that lived together in Yathrib were constantly at

When Christians and Muslims theorize about whether or not an unlimited God is capable of self-limitation, we are focusing on the transcendent qualities of God. When we pray to the God who forgives us and loves us, we are petitioning the immanent qualities of God.

However, in general, Muslims emphasize the transcendent qualities of God while Christians focus more on the immanent qualities. The language of the Quran focuses on the power and uniqueness of God. God is a personality that is far beyond the limited conceptions of humans. God has no parts and no partners. God is infinite, eternal, absolute, all-knowing, and all-powerful. God has a singular will and cannot be influenced by any other power. God is in control of this world and God alone defines what is good and what is evil. God is to be feared and obeyed.

Christians, on the other hand, tend to focus more on the loving, forgiving, graceful qualities of God. God loves and forgives every human being. God wants each human being to be aware of God's love and to love God in return. Christians are more apt to talk about God's love than God's awesome power. God is to be loved and obeyed.

The primary difference in the way in which Christians and Muslims view God is that Christians believe the total nature of God was revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Because of God's absolute love for us, God chose to break into history by becoming a human being, Jesus of Nazareth, to show us exactly what God is like and exactly what God wants each of us to be like. For Muslims, however, the absolute revelation of God is the Quran, which they believe is the actual words of God dictated to Muhammad in Arabic, the language of God. Christians know about God from the nature of the God-man, Jesus. Muslims know about God from the God-text, the Quran.

Jesus and Muhammad

Christians believe that Jesus was the expected Jewish Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God. He was, simultaneously, totally human and totally divine. He was both a perfect human being and a perfect revelation of God. He was able to work miracles because he was God in human form. He came to announce the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth and to call human beings to a new way of life, a new ethic. Most Christians believe Jesus could have avoided dying on the cross but chose to sacrifice himself on behalf of humankind. After he was dead and entombed, he rose from death, made several appearances to his followers, and ascended into heaven.

Muslims believe that Jesus was a great prophet, possibly the most

Chapter Ten: Primary Theological Beliefs

Because Christianity is known as a religion of believers and Islam as a religion of doers, it is natural to assume that Christianity has a more sophisticated theological system than Islam. However, this is far from true. Both religions, in fact, have rich traditions of theological reflection both in the halls of academia and in the minds and hearts of individual believers.

Beliefs about God

Most Christian and Muslim beliefs about God are identical. God is the singular agent of creation. Science tells us that everything in the universe is caused by something else and yet intellectually we know that at some time everything had to begin from nothing. Therefore, for persons of faith – both Christian and Muslim – God is the uncaused entity at the beginning of all creation.

Both Christians and Muslims understand God to be, at the same time, both transcendent and immanent. The transcendence of God is the abstract, infinite, impersonal, and somewhat unknowable nature of God, especially as God is the object of theoretical reflection. The logical opposite of transcendence is immanence: God's personal, knowable presence and indwelling nearness, especially as God is the object of faith and piety.

war with one another and they had heard that Muhammad's new religious philosophy contained ideas that might help them end the strife. When an assassination attempt on Muhammad failed in 622, the group of Muslim families decided to immigrate to Yathrib. This immigration is identified by Muslims as the beginning of the Islamic era because it was in Yathrib (renamed "Medina" which means "The Prophet's City") that Muhammad was finally able to fully implement the ideals of the Quran. Because of this, the year 622 is year one on the Islamic Calendar.

In Medina, Muhammad was successful in bringing most of the conflicting tribes together into a single Muslim community through both the power of his religious message and his administrative and political skills. He immediately built a simple mosque where, every Friday, he preached standing on a tree trunk. All of the activities of the Muslim community – secular, social, sacred, military, political and economic – came under the authority of Muhammad and the Quranic ideal. Everyone belonged to the one community regardless of their tribal affiliation, no one could attack anyone else, and everyone pledged to protect one another. It was revolutionary and it brought peace to the troubled area.

Back in Mecca, however, the leaders of the Quraysh were greatly threatened by the development of this new "super tribe" especially when the Muslims, needing more economic resources, turned to the honored Arabic tradition of "ghazu," raiding other tribes for booty and livestock. Because of the recent hostilities from the Meccans, their rich caravans became the primary target. In March of 624, a bitter battle ensued between a Meccan army protecting a major caravan and the Median forces led by Muhammad himself and, even though the Meccan force was much larger, it was severely defeated by Muhammad's superior military leadership.

Over the next year, clashes between the Meccan and Median armies continued until the Battle of the Trench when 3,000 Muslims severely defeated an invasion force of 10,000 Meccans, again because of Muhammad's superior military leadership. Following this decisive victory, many of the smaller northern Arab tribes gradually joined the Muslim community under the leadership of Muhammad and in just a few years, this Muslim community became the dominant force in Arabia.

However, even though the Quran allows for warfare as a means of defending the faithful, it teaches that war is so awful that Muslims must do everything possible to restore peace as quickly as possible. Therefore, after his stunning defeat of the Meccans, Muhammad set out to bring peace to the land. He announced that daily prayers would now be done facing Mecca instead of Jerusalem and he set out with 1,000 unarmed fol-

Christianity and Islam

lowers to make the traditional religious pilgrimage, the hajj, to the Kabah in Mecca. This led to a peace treaty between the Muslim community and the Quraysh and dozens more small Arab tribes converted to Islam and joined the Muslim community.

In 630, the Quraysh violated the treaty and attacked one of the smaller tribes belonging to the Muslim community and, in retaliation, Muhammad marched on Mecca with a huge army. The Quraysh surrendered without a single drop of blood being shed. The Muslims entered Mecca, destroyed all the idols around the Kabah, and rededicated it to the worship of the one God, Allah.

Two years later, at age 68, Muhammad died of natural causes just ten years after the beginning of the Islamic era. In this decade, virtually all of Arabia had converted and become part of the Muslim community. Some of this happened through creative political alliances, some through marriages in which Muhammad added to his growing harem of wives, and some through military force. However, the dominant thing that united the Arabs – and would eventually unite the largest and longest lasting empire the world had ever known — was the compelling attractiveness of the Islamic faith.

Jesus encountered conflict and gave up his life as a sacrificial Savior of humankind. Muhammad encountered conflict and rose up as a great religious, political and military Savior of humankind. These two deeply religious men of God brought about more change in the world than all of the other leaders throughout history combined.

Reflection Questions:

1. *Why do you think the preaching of both Jesus and Muhammad so threatened the power structures of their time?*
2. *Do you believe that Jesus had the power to prevent his crucifixion?*
3. *Do you think Muhammad was less of a religious man because he responded militarily to the attacks on the Muslim community?*

Session Nine: Religious Leadership and Worship

tices and Sufi Muslims, in particular, are involved in a wide variety of more esoteric practices.

Reflection Questions:

1. *What differences between Christian and Muslim worship practices are most pronounced for you?*
2. *Islamic clergy have more authority over wide areas of people's lives than Christian clergy. Do you think Christian ministers and priests should have more influence over your economic, political, and family activities?*
3. *What are the risks when religious leaders also become political leaders?*

Most Christian sanctuaries are auditoriums with rows of pews for congregational seating, an altar in front for sacramental activities, and a pulpit to one side for preaching. Mosques, however, feature a large open space with floors adorned with oriental carpets. An important feature of this open area is the “mihrab,” an ornamental niche set into the wall which indicates the direction of Mecca so congregants will know which way to face when praying. Near the mihrab is the “minbar,” a raised wooden platform with steps from which the imam delivers the Friday sermon. Every mosque also has an area set aside for the ritual washing required before prayer.

Each Friday, Muslims gather as congregations at mosques for their regular noon prayers followed by Quranic readings and a sermon by the imam. Congregants of different ages, ethnic groups and social status stand side by side in straight rows facing the mihrab. The men and women are separated for reasons of modesty because prostrations and bodily movements are part of the ritual. In the more conservative mosques, men and women are separated by a screen and in some fundamentalist traditions, only men attend Friday services.

The sermon or khutba delivered from the minbar by the imam is a key element of the Friday mosque service. Although the sermon begins with a quotation from the Quran, it often contains instructions on social, political, economic, and family life as well as theological reflection on the Quran and Hadith. In situations in which Muslims live in occupied situations such as Palestine and Iraq, Friday sermons are sometimes used to inspire members of the congregation to fight against occupying forces.

Even more than churches, mosques serve as centers of a wide variety of Islamic activities including Quranic recitations, charitable activities, funerals, marriages, signing of business agreements, etc. The mosques are open and used virtually every day and visiting a mosque you would see small groups of people chatting, others reading the Quran, and some napping on the carpets. In addition to the main worship hall of the mosque, most also have an Islamic Center with space for social gatherings, community celebrations, religious classes, youth activities, sports, job training and placement, and a variety of other activities of benefit to the Islamic community.

Like Christians, Muslims participate in a wide variety of personal devotional practices and many of them – personal prayer, fasting, studying the Quran, devotional reading, using a rosary, and other practices – are very similar to Christian practices. In general, Muslim devotional practices are more home, school, and workplace centered than Christian practices.

Chapter Five: Apostles and Caliphs

When Jesus and Muhammad died, their followers were devastated. The disciples of Jesus believed that he was the divine Messiah who had been empowered by God to destroy the Roman occupiers, replace the Jewish aristocracy, and establish a new Jewish kingdom. Instead, he had been arrested, convicted of a capital crime, and executed as a common criminal leaving his followers confused, disappointed, frightened, and hopeless.

When Muhammad died suddenly after uniting virtually all of Arabia in less than a decade, it caught his followers totally unprepared for how to continue their religious and political movement without his religious zeal, powerful intelligence, and charismatic leadership.

The formative years that followed the deaths of Jesus and Muhammad established the tone and structures that would dominate the world’s two largest religions from then on.

The Apostles Empowered by the Holy Spirit

In the days before Jesus was arrested and executed, he told his disciples that, after his death, they should wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit, “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”

After his resurrection and just before his ascension into heaven, Jesus again promised them, “You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many

days from now...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Then, on the day of Pentecost just forty days after Jesus rose from the tomb, his followers were all gathered together when something remarkable happened to them. These men and women, who had been hiding behind locked doors in fear of the same forces that had taken their master, felt a rush of power and enthusiasm that sent them out into the world to continue the teaching of Jesus and to tell the story of his sacrificial death and miraculous resurrection. They understood this rush as the coming of the Holy Spirit that Jesus had promised and it filled them with the courage and zeal necessary to launch a new Christian community.

This new community was, at first, made up of the Jews that had followed Jesus. They formed themselves into a communal society in Jerusalem in which everyone pooled their resources and submitted to the authority of the Apostles headed by Jesus’ leading disciple, Simon Peter, and Jesus’ brother, James. The New Testament tells that this “Mother Church” of Christendom quickly grew to around 5,000 people and an order of Deacons was established to reduce the workload of the Apostles.

Even though this Jerusalem Church was solidly Jewish, it began to reach out cautiously to Gentiles and Samaritans. Peter baptized a household of Gentiles in Caesarea, Peter and John converted a group of Samaritans, and Phillip reached out to an Ethiopian. In addition, as Jewish Christians fled the growing hostilities in Jerusalem, they established small Christian communities in outlying areas that eventually attracted Gentiles into their midst. However, Christianity would probably have remained mostly Jewish if it had not been for the conversion of the Jewish leader, Saul of Tarsus.

Saul was an intellectual Pharisee and a Roman citizen from a well-to-do Jewish family. He had come to Jerusalem to study under the great Rabbi Gamaliel. Saul was also an ardent persecutor of deviant Jewish groups such as the Christians and regularly accepted missions from the Sanhedrin to seek out and arrest them. On one of these missions, Saul had a spectacular vision of Jesus that turned him from an ardent persecutor to an ardent missionary.

Paul eventually settled in the Gentile city of Antioch in Syria because the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem did not trust him. With the support of the Church in Antioch, he made three lengthy journeys over the next several years establishing churches in many of the Roman cities of Asia Minor and Greece. These new churches were predominantly Gentile, eco-

political structures. In Iran, the religious hierarchy controls all institutions just as the caliphs did during the earliest years of Islam.

In Sunni Islam, many governments have created the position of Grand Mufti as the senior religious leader of the nation and, in Shiite Islam, the position of Grand Ayatollah or Supreme Faqih is similar. Because Muslims believe that all of life comes under the authority of the Quran and Hadith, there is frequent tension between the religious leaders and secular leaders in the secular Islamic states.

Worship and Devotion

Virtually every Christian church has a primary worship service on Sunday morning that features preaching by clergy or laypersons, congregational singing and other special music, Scripture reading, and congregational prayer. And, nearly all denominations celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion, some in almost every service, some monthly, and some quarterly or even less often. In fact, because of the historic emphasis on Sunday as the day for Christian worship, it is generally set aside as a non-workday in all Western countries and most of the rest of the world.

In addition to Sunday mornings, many Christian churches hold worship services on Sunday and Wednesday evenings and on a variety of special Holy Days such as Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, All Saint’s Day, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, etc.

A Christian sermon is usually based on a passage of Scripture with heavy emphasis on selections from the New Testament. To insure that congregants hear a broad range of Bible material, many churches follow three-year lectionaries which proscribe a specific set of Scripture portions (usually a Gospel selection, an Epistle selection, and an Old Testament selection) to be read on each Sunday and preachers frequently choose one or more of these proscribed Scripture selections as the subject for their sermons.

Christians participate in a wide variety of personal devotional practices but, for the most part, they are centered in the life of the church rather than in homes, educational institutions or workplaces. Personal prayer and Bible reading are the most common Christian devotional practices but fasting, chanting, devotional reading, and glossolalia are also practiced.

Muslims are expected to pray five times each day (daybreak, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and evening) and, wherever they are at the appointed times, they stop, face Mecca, and go through a ritual that includes hand motions, bowing, prostration, reciting specific prayers in Arabic (regardless of their native language), and concluding with personal prayers.

A “mujtahid” is a special alim that has earned the right to interpret Islamic law using independent reasoning and a “mufti” is a specialist in Islamic law competent to deliver a “fatwa,” a learned paper presenting a legal interpretation or judgment. Fatwas issued by the most renowned muftis often have a significant impact throughout the Islamic world such as the famous fatwa issued by the Ayatollah Khomeini calling for the death of Salmon Rushdie and the fatwa of Osama Bin Laden denouncing American imperialism.

Religious Hierarchy

Most, but certainly not all, Christian denominations have some kind of ecclesiastical hierarchy that generally falls into one of three types: Episcopal, Presbyterian or Congregational. The Episcopal denominations such as Roman Catholic, Anglican, United Methodist, Lutheran, etc. have some kind of elected or appointed bishops (superintendents) that serve as managers over groups of congregations and clergy. The authority of the bishops in relation to representative bodies varies from denomination to denomination. The Presbyterian and Reformed denominations such as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) place authority in a series of representative legislative assemblies, synods, presbyteries and sessions made up of both laity and clergy. The Congregational denominations (Baptists, Churches of Christ, Congregational Churches, etc.) place all authority for doctrine, ordination, clergy assignment, etc. in local congregations that often relate to one another in cooperative assemblies or confederations.

During the golden ages of Islam, the religious leaders were also the political, economic and military leaders. All law was Islamic law. All education was Islamic education. All of society was defined by the Quran and Hadith. So, what Christians would call “church hierarchy” was indistinguishable from other areas of leadership.

However, with the coming of colonialism, the Western concept of separation between religious leadership and leadership of other areas was forced upon the Muslim world and it has remained in effect to some degree ever since. Because of this, the various Muslim sects have developed leadership structures and hierarchies similar to those in Christian denominations. In some countries, such as Turkey and Iraq (before the American invasion), the government, legal, educational, economic and social institutions have been totally secular for many years and religious leaders have had little influence on other areas of life. However, in other countries – such as Saudi Arabia – Islamic law is the law of the land and the religious hierarchy controls almost everything except the topmost

nomically stable, and made up of people from all strata of society from wealthy landowners to slaves.

At the same time that Paul was traveling across the Mediterranean lands starting churches, some of the Apostles and other Christian leaders were doing the same thing. These new churches naturally developed doctrine they had learned from their founders and held allegiances to their founders so that there were groups of “Paul’s Churches” and “John’s Churches” and “Peter’s Churches” throughout the Gentile world.

Paul’s letters to his churches make up more than a third of the New Testament and, when combined with the letters of Peter, John, James, Jude and others, it is clear that the churches of the First Century struggled a great deal with developing their identity and unity. They had no Bible to follow except the Hebrew Bible. They had no concrete doctrine except the oral tradition about the teachings of Jesus. They had no written constitution that told them how they were to structure themselves.

Gradually, the letters of Paul and the other missionaries came together as scripture. The collected stories about Jesus and his teachings were gathered together by a few and written down and, shortly after the end of the First Century, these documents began to take on the status of Sacred Scripture even though they were not officially canonized into what we know as the New Testament for another 250 years. At about this same time, churches began to develop the hierarchical structure of bishops, priests, and deacons that eventually became firmly established.

Over the next three centuries, the rapidly growing Christian community went through some times of great suffering under oppressive Roman governments and other times of great peace and expansion. Eventually, in the Fourth Century, under Constantine the Great, Christianity was established as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Under Constantine and future emperors, the bishops of the church were called together in great synods to solidify the doctrines, Scriptures, and structures of the church. Once this was done, all deviant forms of Christianity were outlawed and eventually brought into the mainstream or destroyed.

The Quran and the Caliphs

The death of Muhammad was a great shock that created a grave crisis in Islam because he had been the sole leader doctrinally, socially, politically, and militarily. The Muslim Community had grown so rapidly that it contained many smaller tribes whose conversion to Islam was marginal and larger tribes that had formed alliances for reasons that were more political and economic than religious. Without the charismatic leadership

of Muhammad, it was not clear whether or not the unified Muslim Community would be able to sustain itself.

However, a distinct difference between Islam after the death of Muhammad and Christianity after the death of Jesus was the existence of the Quran, the sacred Scriptures of Islam that had been dictated to Muhammad over a twenty-year period. Muslims firmly believed that the Quran was the actual word of God for humankind and that it contained everything they needed to continue.

Another difference was that Muhammad himself had consistently argued that he was nothing more than a Prophet, a Messenger, in a long line of Messengers including Adam, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. The Quran says “Muhammad is naught but a Messenger; Messengers have passed away before him.” At the death of Muhammad, Abu Bakr said, “O men, if anyone worships Muhammad, Muhammad is dead. If anyone worships God, God is alive, immortal.”

One of the key questions with which the Muslim Community had to deal was whether or not they would try to remain a single, united community under one religious doctrine and one leader or to split back up into separate communities each headed by its own political and religious leader. They opted for one united community and elected Muhammad’s father-in-law and closest ally, Abu Bakr, to be the first Caliph or “Successor of the Prophet.”

Bakr died after only two years and Umar ibn al-Khattab was elected as the second Caliph. He served until he was killed by a Persian prisoner of war ten years later. Uthman ibn Affan was elected to be the third Caliph and ruled for twelve years until he was assassinated by malcontent Muslim soldiers who acclaimed Muhammad’s cousin, Ali ibn Abi Talib, as the fourth Caliph. Ali ruled for only five years until he was murdered by a Muslim extremist.

These four Caliphs – Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali – are known as the Rashidun or the “Rightly Guided Caliphs.” Like Muhammad, they were deeply religious men who lived modestly, followed the Quran explicitly, and worked tirelessly to keep the Muslim Community together as a united entity. The three decades that they ruled are looked upon by most Muslims as the Golden Age of Islam when every facet of life came under the authority of the Quran, when their political leaders were also their religious leaders, and when the egalitarian and religious ideals of Muhammad and the Quran took shape in a united Islamic Empire which included most of the modern Arab countries as well as Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the countries of Central Asia.

nation to denomination. The prophetic functions (preaching and teaching), the pastoral functions (comforting and counseling), and the administrative functions (congregational leadership) are activities of virtually all Christian clergy. The way in which various Christians refer to their clergy – as “priest” or “minister” or “preacher” or “pastor” – often indicates the way in which their denomination primarily views professional clergy.

In addition to the clergy that serve local congregations, Christian denominations employ a variety of other religion professionals such as monks, nuns, friars, seminary professors, missionaries, bureaucrats, Christian educators, etc. requiring various levels of education and denominational licensing. Many, but certainly not all, denominations ordain both men and women to all professional clergy positions.

Muslims argue that they do not have an ordained clergy like Christians and that all acts of worship including officiating at Friday mosque services, formal prayers, weddings and funerals can be done by any Muslim man.

In early Islam, pious Muslims from many walks of life led prayers and functioned as Islamic scholars, lawyers, educators, preachers and devotional leaders. However, over the centuries, these activities have gradually come to be performed largely by a group of religious professionals who are often distinguished by unique clothing.

Today, every mosque has an “imam” who leads prayers, recites the Quran, and preaches in Friday services. Parallel to the Christian practice, the smallest Muslim congregations designate laymen to serve as imams. Larger congregations, however, have full-time imams who perform most of the same functions that Christian clergy perform with the exception of administering sacraments. These functions include preaching, teaching, leading worship, visiting the sick and grieving, organizing community activities, preparing couples for marriage, counseling, interpreting the Quran and Hadith, and administering the mosque, Islamic Center, and school. Most imams have received a graduate level theological education from one of the many Islamic madrasahs (seminaries). Women do not serve as imams.

In addition to the imams that serve the mosque congregations, the “ulama” (singular “alim”) are clergy-like scholars of the Quran, Islamic law, and theology. Like imams, the ulama are always men and are often distinguished by their distinctive dress. They serve as the protectors and authoritative interpreters of Islam and are called by many different titles depending on their geographic location and the branch of Islam or school of law they represent. Even though women do not serve as ulama, they play an important role in Islamic scholarship in many parts of the world.

Chapter Nine: Religious Leadership and Worship

As we have seen so far in this study, many things about Christianity and Islam are both very similar and very different at the same time. The worship practice and ecclesiastical leadership of the two religions certainly reflects this same complexity.

Clergy

Most Christian denominations have some kind of ordained clergy but the level of their ordination, the levels of training required for ordination, and the meaning of ordination varies considerably from one denomination to another. Most denominations require clergy to have at least one graduate degree and some kind of denominational licensing not unlike the requirements for other professionals such as medical doctors, lawyers, and architects. However, some of the more conservative denominations are much more subjective in their selection and ordination of clergy.

Clergy functions usually include some combination of priestly, prophetic, pastoral and administrative activities. As priests, Christian clergy consecrate the elements of Holy Communion, Baptize adherents, lead worship, perform marriages and funerals, hear confessions, provide absolution, and perform a variety of other sacerdotal functions. However, the importance of these priestly functions varies considerably from denomi-

The spread of Islam during these three decades was not without conflict. First, to maintain the unity of the Islamic Empire, Bakr had to deal with the defection of a few tribes that had originally joined the community for purely economic and political reasons and who believed that, with the death of Muhammad, their alliances were broken. The influence of the new religion was so strong, however, that when these tribes tried to break away, they claimed that they were still Muslim but with their own religious and political leaders.

In what are called the Ridda or Apostasy Wars, Bakr moved swiftly against the defecting tribes and brought them back into the larger community. The primary result of the Apostasy Wars was that Arabia became, in effect, a nation state for the first time in its history with a single religion, a single government, and a standing army.

During the next two decades, under the Caliphates of Umar and Uthman, there was a great wave of expansion that captured most of the holdings of the Byzantine and the Sasanian empires that surrounded them. These conquests were understood to be Holy Wars liberating people from oppressive, non-Islamic governments but, true to the Quran, the Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians in these lands were not required to convert. They were allowed to continue their non-Islamic worship activities so long as they paid an annual tribute or tax to the Muslim Community.

Throughout the 24 years of the caliphates of Bakr, Umar and Uthman, a minority within the Islamic movement continued to believe that the leadership of Islam should have fallen to Ali, who was a cousin of the Prophet and, therefore, his rightful heir. Near the end of Uthman's reign, this movement gained considerable strength and, eventually, brought about the death of Uthman and the establishment of Ali as Caliph. The next few years were rent with civil war that established most of the factions or "denominations" that have existed within Islam ever since.

It is easy for Christians to be critical of the growth of Islam by defining it entirely as military and political conquest rather than religious revival. In fact, Islam was born into a world of constant violence, tribal warfare, and vicious oppression of the weaker members of society and while Islam did not bring about a total cessation of violence, it certainly curbed it through its religious emphasis on personal morality and the building of a just community. Because the Muslim sees all of life, including political and economic activity, as part of the sacred quest, empire building was as much a part of religious commitment as prayer and worship.

Reflection Questions:

1. *For both Christianity and Islam, the most significant growth happened when the religions became “established” as the primary religion of large geo-political entities — the Roman Empire and the Islamic Empire. What does this tell us about the spread of religion?*
2. *How do you feel about the idea of religion being spread through military force?*
3. *The concept of separation of “church and state” or “secular and sacred” is primarily a modern American concept that has gradually spread to other Western nations. Do you understand this to be a good or bad idea?*

own shrines.

The Hajj concludes with the most important festival of the Islamic year, the Great Feast of the Sacrifice (Eid ul Adha) in which animals are ritually slaughtered for the feast and meat is given to the poor. This four-day festival happens simultaneously throughout the Islamic world and is accompanied by a wide variety of festivities similar to the Christian celebrations at Christmas and Easter.

Persons returning from the Hajj are considered to be especially spiritual and are given a place of honor in their communities and anyone that dies while on the pilgrimage is believed to automatically attain the halloved status of martyr of the faith.

Christians have no pilgrimages which are either required or have the religious importance of the Hajj but many Christians find meaning in pilgrimages to special religious sites such as the Holy Land or Lourdes. Certainly, the Christian celebrations surrounding Christmas and Easter have many parallels to the special festivals celebrated by Muslims at the end of Ramadan and the Hajj.

Reflection Questions:

1. *In modern times, most Christian denominations impose few if any requirements on their members. Do you think Christianity would be strengthened if we had some “Pillars of Faith” like Muslims?*
2. *What would happen in your church if contributions were assessed and required based on an absolute percentage of each families total wealth?*
3. *Faithful Muslims frequently see one another going through their prayer rituals in public places. Do faithful Christians do anything in public to show their faithfulness to others?*

Pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj)

The fifth of the Five Pillars of Islam is the pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia that is expected of all Muslims at least once if they are physically and financially able to do so. The Hajj happens every year during the first twelve days of the twelfth month, and between two and three million Muslims from all around the world take the pilgrimage every year.

The pilgrims who participate in the Hajj wear simple garments. The men wear two seamless white cloths and the women wear a similar outfit that entirely covers the body except for face and hands. These simple white garments symbolize purity and the unity of all Muslims regardless of economic status, race, language, or ethnic heritage.

As the pilgrims approach Mecca, they shout “I am here, O Lord, I am here!” and, when they enter the city, their first commitment is to visit the Kaaba and move around it seven times in great counterclockwise circles in the same manner that they believe the angels move around God’s throne in heaven. Known as the “House of God,” the Kaaba is the most sacred spot in the Muslim world. It is a large (45’ x 33’ x 50’) cube-shaped structure covered with black cloth embroidered in gold with verses from the Quran. Muslims believe the original Kaaba was built by Adam as an earthly representation of the heavenly throne of God. The current Kaaba was built by Abraham and Ishmael after the original was destroyed in the great flood of Noah’s time. It stands at the center of the courtyard of the Grand Mosque in Mecca and contains the “Black Stone,” a meteorite believed by Muslims to have been placed there by Abraham and Ishmael to commemorate the original covenant between God and Abraham.

After the sacred ceremony at the Kaaba, the pilgrims on the Hajj participate in a variety of rituals. They process between the hills of Safa and Marwa seven times to commemorate Hagar’s desperate desert search for her son Ishmael and for water. They drink from the Well of Zamzam believed to be the spot where Hagar and Ishmael first found water. They gather at a vast empty plain 12 miles outside of Mecca called Arafat where Muhammad delivered his final sermon and they go to Mina where they symbolically reject evil by throwing stones at three pillars on the site where they believe Satan tempted Abraham and Ishmael.

Saudi Arabia’s Wahabbi Sunni Muslims have prohibited Shiite Muslims from entering the mosque in Mecca for many years so they have developed their own pilgrimages to the shrines of Ali and his son Hussein in Najaf and Karbala, Iraq. However, under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, Shiites were also prohibited from taking pilgrimages to their

Chapter Six: Schisms and Denominations

Both Christianity and Islam have failed to maintain the unity that their founders envisioned. Christianity remained one Body of Christ for a millennium, largely because it became the established religion of the Roman Empire and because it developed a rigid autocratic structure of bishops, cardinals and the pope in Rome. Then, in its second millennium, Christianity split into hundreds of denominations.

Islam split into its two largest sects – the Sunnis and the Shiites – just a few decades after the death of Muhammad but has developed only a few other “denominations” over the remaining decades. The history of division within the world’s two largest religions has also been tarnished by intense hostilities, oppression of minorities, and warfare that is in conflict with the teachings of both religions. In fact, Christians have killed more Christians and Muslims have killed more Muslims in intrafaith struggles over the years than either religion has killed of the other.

The Catholic-Orthodox Schism and the Protestant Reformation

Earliest Christianity struggled to maintain its unity as it defined itself. An early “denominationalism” developed because there was no New Testament, no universal doctrine, and no constitution on which to build its

definition of itself. Clusters of churches developed largely around an Apostle or other missionary that had originally formed them. So, there were Paul Churches, John Churches, Peter Churches, Apollo Churches, etc.

Because so much depended on charismatic leadership rather than written doctrine and structure, some of these Apostle-oriented churches split into smaller clusters when the Apostles were no longer around to hold them together. It is clear from the five “John” books in the New Testament, for instance, that the congregations in Western Turkey that had originally formed around the Apostle John eventually split into sects that called one another heretics.

In 313, however, Christianity became officially recognized by the government of Rome and, therefore, had the same rights as other religions. Then, in 380, it became the official religion of the Roman Empire and, with only a few splinters, most of which were either destroyed or brought back into the mainstream, Christianity remained a unified body until 1054.

After a thousand years of unity, the church split into the Roman Catholic Church in the West and the Eastern Orthodox Church in the East. The causes of the Great Schism were complex but had been fomenting for nearly 200 years. The West spoke Latin while the East spoke Greek. The pragmatic and military culture of the West clashed with the intellectual and artistic culture of the East. The struggle for primacy between the bishop of Rome (the pope) and the bishop of Constantinople (the patriarch) was exacerbated by the political struggles between the European Holy Roman Empire and the Middle Eastern Byzantine Empire. The doctrinal issue of whether the Holy Spirit proceeded from both the Father and the Son (the West) or just from the Father (the East) became a religious rallying cry for both sides.

Most historians date the separation from 1054 when Pope Leo IX in Rome and Patriarch Michael Cerularius in Constantinople mutually excommunicated one another. Both sides continued to seek reconciliation until the Crusader armies from the West sacked Constantinople and slaughtered much of its population in 1204.

The next big split in Christianity came with the Protestant Reformation in the Sixteenth Century that eventually resulted in hundreds of new autonomous Protestant denominations around the world. There is really no single reason behind the creation of these many new denominations. In Europe, the birth of the Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican movements had a complex mixture of doctrinal and political causes and resulted in bloody conflicts between the Catholic and Protestant nations. Later, the

ly ill persons can defer their fasting during Ramadan and make it up later. Children gradually increase the number of days they fast each year until they reach puberty when they begin the complete fast along with their parents.

Ramadan begins at the first appearance of the crescent moon and continues until the next crescent moon so it moves in relationship to our calendar and begins eleven days earlier every year. The month is very sacred and the focus is on recognizing human frailty and dependence upon God, personal spiritual development, and outreach to the less fortunate.

During Ramadan, everyone rises early enough to eat a meal before sunrise. Nothing is then eaten or drunk until after sunset when a light “breakfast” is eaten. Each evening, families and guests gather to read the Quran and pray together either at home or at the mosque followed by a ritual meal with special foods and sweets before bedtime. Many Muslims commit to reading the entire Quran every year during Ramadan.

On the 27th of Ramadan, called the “Night of Power,” Muslims commemorate the actual day that Muhammad received the first revelation of the Quran with extensive evening mosque services. Then, on the first day of the next month, they celebrate the Feast of the Breaking of the Fast (Eid ul Fitr) with special foods, family gatherings, dressing the children in new clothes, giving alms to the poor, decorations, exchanging gifts, and other festivities that last for several days.

Many Christians used to refrain from certain foods each Friday and during the weeks preceding Easter, but few observe the ritual today. Some Christians in the Methodist/Wesleyan tradition follow the practice of John Wesley in fasting every week from after the Thursday evening meal until the Friday evening meal and contributing what would have been spent on food to Christian causes. Some others participate in occasional fasts as part of specific religious ceremonies but, in general, fasting is not an important part of Christian worship and devotional activities.

Most Christians do, however, observe periods of religious preparation prior to the Holy Days of Christmas and Easter. The seven-week period of Lent leading up to Easter and the four-week period of Advent leading up to Christmas have historically been somber periods of penitence and personal reflection designed to prepare persons for the important festivals that followed. However, today, Lent and Advent are much more celebratory in nature. The feasting and festivities surrounding Christmas and Easter have much of the same atmosphere and activities for Christians that the feasts at the end of Ramadan and the Hajj have for Muslims.

the full cycle seventeen times in a single day. On Friday, the noon prayers are normally done at the mosque where they are followed by Quranic readings and a sermon.

Christians have no obligatory procedures that parallel the Muslim Salat. However, many Christians understand Sunday worship attendance, the celebration of Holy Communion, confession, Wednesday night prayer services, prayer at meals, prayer before bed, etc. to be quasi-obligatory in nature.

Alms Giving (Zakat)

The third of the Five Pillars of Islam is the giving of alms. The Zakat is not precisely charity because it is compulsory but it is not really a tax either because it is given as an act of purification and thanksgiving to God. The tithe is paid to religious leaders to be used exclusively for helping persons in need. It is prescribed to be an annual contribution of 2.5% of a person's total wealth and assets. The Zakat supports a general welfare system in Islamic countries because it is used exclusively to feed the poor, to encourage conversion to Islam, to ransom captives, to relieve debtors of their burden, to help travelers, to support those who devote themselves to the cause of God, to build hospitals, to support people injured in a Jihad, and to defend the Islamic faith. Shiites also pay an additional tithe of 20% on all new income for the year that is used for similar purposes.

In addition to the obligatory Zakat, Muslims are encouraged to make charitable contributions to the poor during special Holy Day ceremonies and throughout the year as an expression of their faith.

Giving is also important to Christians and some form of tithe or pledged weekly contribution is understood to be a condition of membership in most churches. In general, Christians affirm charitable giving as part of their thanksgiving to God and their obedience to the kind of outreach to others called for in the ethic taught by Jesus. Few Christians, however, would be comfortable with the concept of an obligatory tax as part of their religious commitment.

The Ramadan Fast (Sawm)

The fourth of the Five Pillars of Islam is the requirement to observe a month-long fast during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar and the month in which Muhammad received the first revelation of the Quran. During the 29 or 30 days of Ramadan, all adult Muslim believers must abstain from food, drink and sex during daylight hours unless they are seriously ill, insane, pregnant, nursing, or aged. Travelers and modest-

Evangelical Revival gave birth to movements such as the Baptists and Methodists for reasons that had more to do with spiritual enthusiasm than doctrines or politics.

As Christianity spread to the New World, Asia, and Africa, the Protestant movement continued to splinter for structural, theological and political reasons. Today, there are more than 300 Protestant denominations in the United States alone.

Even though modern Christendom is structurally divided into a vast number of denominations, there is a greater spirit of cooperation and acceptance between denominations than there has been for centuries. Cooperation and reconciliation between the three main bodies of Christendom – Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant – is not likely to ever bring about a single, unified structure but, with the exception of a few Fundamentalist denominations, there is a growing sense of Christian unity in the world.

Sunnis and Shiites

Because Islam began with a sacred text, the Quran, and a structure already solidified by Muhammad, it did not go through the early struggles for unity that Christianity did. However, its most severe split came just three decades after the death of Muhammad and has remained a bitter division within Islam ever since.

When the Muslim Community chose Abu Bakr to be the first caliph in 622, there was a contingent that believed the leadership of Islam should pass to a blood relative of Muhammad and they favored Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's cousin, ward, son-in-law, and closest living male relative. During the reigns of the second caliph, Umar, and the third caliph, Uthman, the support for the popular and deeply religious Ali grew until a contingent of the army mutinied in 656, assassinated Uthman, and acclaimed Ali as the fourth Caliph.

This action, however, resulted in a five-year civil war between the supporters of Ali and various rebel factions. One faction was led by Muhammad's favorite wife, Aisha. Another was led by Muawiyah, the head of Uthman's Umayyad clan, who deposed Ali and had himself proclaimed caliph. Another rebel faction was a radical group of discontents called the Kharajites who assassinated Ali in 661.

Caliph Muawiyah brought peace to the Muslim Community, restored a strong central government, ruled for two decades, and launched the Umayyad dynasty that would expand Islam into the largest empire the world had ever known. However, the end result of the civil war was that

a minority Shiite (Partisans of Ali) movement split away from the mainstream Sunnis and the two groups have remained hostile to one another ever since.

The Shiites believe that the first three Caliphs were illegitimate and that Ali was the first of a series of twelve Imams, all descendants of Ali, who inherited the special spiritual qualities of Muhammad. They believe the twelfth Imam, Muhammad al Muntazar, who disappeared in 874, is the only legitimate ruler of the Islamic world. In a belief not unlike the Christian hope for the second coming of Jesus, the Shiites hope for the eventual return of Muntazar. In the interim, they believe that all authority – sacred, economic, secular, military, cultural, and political – should be in the hands of Islamic clerics the way it is in Iran.

Shiites are primarily concentrated in Iran, Iraq and parts of Syria but are found in lesser concentrations throughout the Islamic world and they make up about 12-15% of the total Islamic population. There are approximately thirty smaller Shiite sects that have split off of the main group over the years. Over the centuries there have been many outbreaks of violence between the majority Sunnis and the minority Shiites have lost so many of these clashes that suffering has become a standard tenet of their theology. Blocked from visiting the two main Islamic shrines in Mecca and Medina by the Wahabbi Sunnis of Saudi Arabia, the Shiites have come to revere the mosques built around the tombs of Ali in Najaf, Iraq and his son, Hasan, in Karbala, Iraq as primary pilgrimage sites.

Sufis

While the division between Sunnis and Shiites parallels the Christian divisions between denominations, the relationship between Sufis and other Muslims is more like the modern Christian Charismatic movement that has participants in many different denominations. In the beginning, all of Islam was deeply spiritual but, when the Islamic empire became wealthy and powerful, Islam became more and more secular. In reaction to this, mystical Sufi brotherhoods began to spring up in both Sunni and Shiite areas across the empire and, today, it is estimated that nearly 40% of all Muslims are involved in some kind of Sufi brotherhood.

The term “Sufi” comes from the Arabic word for wool because the first Sufis wore coarse woolen garments similar to those worn by Christian monks and mystics. Sufis focus on self-sacrifice, spiritual discipline, studying and meditating on the Quran, praying and fasting, denying material desires, and carrying out good works. Their goal is to arrive at total communion with God, usually through the help of a teacher and a wide

The Declaration of Faith (Shahada)

A Muslim is a person who bears witness to the phrase, “There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of God.” This affirmation – the first of the Five Pillars of Islam – is all that is necessary for a person to become a Muslim when it is said with heartfelt conviction. It is repeated many times in the daily prayers of Islam. It is whispered in the ears of newborn children. It is the last thing said over the dying. It is shouted as a war cry and whispered as a blessing. It is the universal affirmation of Muslims the world over.

Because different Christians emphasize different beliefs, there is no universal short creedal statement that all Christians share. Many would suggest that, “Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior” is universal but very few Christians would automatically identify the phrase as a universally accepted creed. Most Christians accept the much longer Apostle’s Creed and, certainly, such Biblical phrases as the Lord’s Prayer, the Golden Rule and John 3.16 are known and accepted by virtually all Christians.

Daily Prayers (Salat)

One of the most impressionable features of daily life in Muslim countries is the frequent Arabic chanting by the muezzins from the mosque minarets that, today, are usually intensified through electronic megaphones. These calls to prayer happen five times a day: at dawn, noon, late afternoon, sunset, and late evening. When the call to prayer happens, all Muslims are required to stop whatever they are doing and pray (worship) at home, in public, or at the mosque. This set of canonical prayers, called “Salat,” is the second of the Five Pillars of Islam.

The prayers are obligatory for all Muslims and have been carefully prescribed since the time of Muhammad. They must be preceded by ritual washing of the hands, face, head, arms and feet as well as by mental and emotional preparation. Then, the worshipper must face Mecca and recite a lengthy preset prayer (mostly verses from the Quran) in Arabic while going through a series of body motions similar to those of persons approaching a king, shah, or emperor in late medieval times. These body movements, which symbolize total subjection of the individual to the power of God, include standing, holding one’s hands beside one’s ears, folding one’s hands across one’s chest, bowing, and prostrating with one’s forehead touching the floor or ground. The entire sequence, called the “rakah,” is repeated one, two, or three more times depending on which of the five prayer times is being celebrated. In all, the worshipper completes

Chapter Eight: Pillars of Faith

It has often been said that the biggest difference between Christianity and Islam is that the first focuses on orthodoxy and the second on orthopraxy. A Christian is defined mostly by what he or she believes. A Muslim is defined mostly by what he or she does. Christianity is a system of beliefs while Islam is a system of actions.

These are only broad generalities. It is certainly true that actions are also important to Christians and beliefs are also important to Muslims. The New Testament phrases from James that say, “Faith without works is dead,” are important emphases for many Christians. Similarly, Islam has always emphasized the requirement that adherents believe in at least six things: (1) Allah, (2) Allah’s angels, (3) Allah’s revealed books (Old Testament, New Testament, and Quran), (4) Allah’s messengers (the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, Jesus, and Muhammad), (5) Allah’s day of judgment, and (6) Allah’s providence.

Still, in general, Christians do place more emphasis on beliefs than actions and Muslims do place more emphasis on actions than beliefs. Consequently, Christianity has nothing that directly parallels the famed “Five Pillars of Islam” that define the religious duties expected of every Muslim.

These Five Pillars are: (1) The Declaration of Faith (Shahada), (2) The Daily Prayers (Salat), (3) Alms Giving (Zakat), (4) Ramadan Fasting (Sawm), and (5) The Pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj).

variety of ecstatic practices including prayer, chanting, and music. The Mawlawi/Mevlevi order (Whirling Dervishes) in Turkey is internationally known for its ecstatic dances.

Wahhabis

Compared to Sunnis, Shiites, and Sufis, the ultraconservative or “fundamentalist” Wahhabis are a relatively modern development in Islam. Wahhabi Islam is the official religion of Saudi Arabia and it has spawned a variety of other fundamentalist groups including Al-Qaeda.

Wahhabism began with Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-92) but is based largely on the writings of the Thirteenth Century cleric, Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah who sought to reform Sunni Islam to its original purity. Wahhab thought that Sunni Islam had become too secular, the Shiites were heretics, and the worship practices of the Sufis had degenerated into near-paganism. He called for a puritanical reformation to bring about absolute adherence to the Quran and the Traditions (records of Muhammad and the members of the earliest Islamic Community) in all of society.

Even though the original Wahhabi movement was squelched by the Ottoman government, the ideas of Wahhab have continued to influence a variety of reform movements. In the Eighteenth, Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, Western colonialism demeaned, humiliated, and economically devastated most of the Islamic areas of the world. Throughout the Middle Ages, the Islamic empire had been so intellectually, artistically, militarily, and economically superior to the Christian West that the sudden rise of the Western colonial powers left the Islamic world in chaos. In addition, the imperialist nations of the West forcefully and arbitrarily broke up the united Islamic world into artificially drawn Western style nations headed by Western-appointed rulers.

As the Islamic world came out from under the abuses of Western imperialism, some countries – such as Turkey – opted for Western style secular states with institutions carefully separated between secular and religious. Others – such as Saudi Arabia – were greatly influenced by the Wahhabi movement and opted to become total Islamic states in which the Quran became the constitution and all of society came under Sharia (Islamic religious law). Most modern Islamic countries, however, are somewhere in between these two extremes. All of this resulted in intense anti-Western feelings, growing resistance to Western secularism, and the belief by many that the only way to restore the unity and purity of Islam is through a radical return to its roots. Therefore, the influence of

Wahhabism and its fundamentalist offshoots such as Al-Qaeda continues to grow throughout the Islamic world.

Reflection Questions:

1. *Why do you think Christianity and Islam have been so prone to split into a variety of sects, especially since the teachings of Jesus and Muhammad both call for a unified faith?*
2. *What do you think would happen if either Christianity or Islam became a single, unified movement in the world?*
3. *Why do you think that fundamentalist movements — Christian fundamentalists, Islamic fundamentalists, or Jewish fundamentalists — develop so much hostility toward the other groups in their own religion and toward other religions?*

Community during this period. These Suras also deliver most of the rules for living as a faithful Muslim: rules for worship, prayer, fasting, politics, warfare, economics, treatment of others, education, sexual relations, commerce, etc.

Hadith

The Quran, however, did not cover every aspect of life. While Muhammad was still alive, Muslims sought his opinion on virtually everything: religious belief and ritual, eating, diplomacy, warfare, personal hygiene, marriage, treatment of spouses, etc. In addition, Muhammad was considered to be a perfect Muslim so his modest lifestyle, generosity, and egalitarian ideals were widely imitated.

After Muhammad's death, thousands of his sayings, pronouncements, and actions – called “Hadith” which means “news” or “reports” – were in the minds of his followers and it soon became clear that these had considerable value for helping guide future generations of Muslims. So, an elaborate process was developed for collecting and verifying the authenticity of each saying or action of the Prophet. This process took nearly 200 years and resulted in six major collections which contain both the sayings or actions and the lists of persons through whom the oral traditions were handed down. The Quran and the Hadith, together, form the basis of Islamic belief and provide guidance for virtually all facets of life.

Reflection Questions:

1. *Muslims turn to the Quran and Hadith for guidance on all aspects of life including politics, law, economics, family life, dietary practices, sexuality, and warfare. Why don't Christians see the Bible as a guide for all of life?*
2. *How does the Christian concept of revelation (in the person of Jesus) and the Muslim concept of revelation (in the Quran) shape our two religions in different ways.*
3. *In what ways do you think the Bible and the Quran contain absolute truth and in what ways do you think they are the products of human writers?*

placed at Medina, Kufa, Basra and Damascus to safeguard future texts from modification.

The Quran was delivered to Muhammad in Arabic and Muslims believe that it cannot be translated into other languages. When the Quran is published in other languages the publications are called “interpretations” rather than translations and the Arabic is usually published side-by-side with the other language. Throughout the Islamic world, the Quran is read aloud in Arabic, chanted from mosque minarets in Arabic, sung on the radio in Arabic, and memorized in its entirety by imams in Arabic even though the majority of Muslims today are not Arabs and do not speak or understand the language. But the language – especially the sheer beauty of the Arabic styling in the Quran – is part of its mystique and power. In Arabic, the Quran’s poetry is eloquent especially when it is chanted by a gifted imam. Unfortunately, the flowery and poetic language of the Quran does not translate well into European languages and most Americans and Europeans find it very difficult to understand.

The 114 Suras of the Quran are broken down into 6,666 verses known as “ayas.” The Quran would be easier for Westerners to understand if its Suras were grouped either chronologically or thematically but they are not. Instead, they are grouped in order of size with the shortest Sura first and the longest Sura last. Although Western interpretations tend to add chapter numbers to the Suras and verse numbers to the ayas, Muslims still prefer to identify the Suras only by their Arabic titles. Every Sura except the ninth begins with the same phrase, “In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.”

The Suras dictated during Muhammad’s early Meccan period tend to be short warnings to the people in a striking poetic style. They are warned to turn away from the worship of pagan idols and focus on the worship of Allah because, in the ultimate resurrection, the faithful will be blessed while the unbelievers will be damned.

During the later Meccan period, the Suras got longer with more doctrine and some Biblical material showing that Islam grew out of and, in fact, perfected God’s earlier revelations in Judaism and Christianity. The Quran lifts up former prophets such as Noah, Abraham, Moses, Mary, and Jesus but identifies Muhammad as God’s ultimate and final prophet. These Suras also begin to identify the Quran itself as a miraculous revelation of God.

The Suras from the Medina period, focus on the divine approval and blessing of Muhammad’s leadership. Many references to specific historic events show the growing importance of both Muhammad and the Islamic

Chapter Seven: The Bible and the Quran

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all “religions of the book” because they all rely on a set of sacred scriptures. Judaism, the earliest of the three religions, has the Hebrew Scriptures (called the “Old Testament” by Christians). Christianity adds the New Testament to the Hebrew Scriptures. And, Islam, the youngest of the three religions, adds the Quran to both the Old and New Testaments.

Because Christianity accepts the Jewish scriptures and Islam accepts both the Jewish and Christian scriptures, the three religions have much in common, more in fact than the three have with the other religions of the world. It is generally accepted, for example, that Yahweh of the Old Testament, God of the New Testament, and Allah of the Quran are the same deity viewed from somewhat different perspectives.

But, the addition of the New Testament by Christians and the further addition of the Quran by the Muslims also defines the primary differences between the three religions.

Christians and the Bible

Christians view the Bible from widely different perspectives. The most conservative Christians believe the Bible is the absolutely inerrant word of God in which every word was dictated by God and written down by

passive individuals. On the other extreme are Christians who believe that the Bible was written and edited by individuals who brought their own biases, agendas, and limited knowledge into their writings. Most Christians fall somewhere in between and believe that the Bible contains God's word with regard to what is necessary for human salvation but contains some human errors with regard to science, biography, geography, and history.

The Bible is an historical record of God's interaction with humankind that begins with the creation of the world and ends with the promise of Jesus' return to the earth. However, the emphasis of the Bible is not as much on the details of history as it is a record of God's self-revelation in history.

In fact, one of the primary differences between Christians and Muslims is that Christians view the coming of God in human form as Jesus Christ to be God's most significant act of self revelation while Muslims view God's dictation of the Quran as the most important revelatory event. For most Christians, the Bible is merely the record of God's revelation, not the revelation itself.

The New Testament is the primary text for Christians and, whenever the Old Testament and the New Testament are in conflict, most Christians view the New Testament text as corrective. Because Christians view the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ to be ultimate and complete, the record of it in the New Testament supersedes all other revelation contained in the Old Testament.

The New Testament contains 27 separate writings ranging in length from Luke, the longest book, to the Second Letter of John, the shortest. The dates when the books were written range from approximately two decades after the death of Jesus for some of Paul's letters to somewhere in the middle of the Second Century for a few of the others. Most, however, were penned between 50 and 90 AD.

The process of canonizing the New Testament took nearly four centuries even though much of it was accepted as sacred text by the second half of the Second Century. There are many Christian writings from the early centuries of the church that were not included in the canon even though a few of them are viewed by scholars today as being nearly as important as those that were accepted. The final selection of the books of the New Testament did not take place through any official decree of a council or ecclesiastical official but through gradual acceptance across the church.

The first four books – the Gospels written by Matthew, Mark, Luke

and John – are theological, biographical, and historical documents about the life and ministry of Jesus and the fifth book – the Acts of the Apostles – covers the earliest years of the Christian community in much the same way as the Gospels cover the life and ministry of Jesus. All five of these books, which make up more than half of the New Testament, are focused more on the meaning of the events in the life of Jesus and the early church than they are on the details of the events.

Thirteen letters purportedly written by the Apostle Paul follow the Gospels and Acts. Some, like Ephesians and Romans, are theological treatises while others are more spontaneous and personal, dealing with specific persons, problems and events in specific churches. The remainder of the New Testament is made up of seven letters bearing the names of James, John, Peter, and Jude plus a written sermon, Hebrews, and an apocalypse, the Revelation of John.

The New Testament was originally written in non-literary Greek but was fairly soon translated into Latin and it existed only in these two languages for more than a millennium. Today, it is available in virtually every written language in the world. It is the basis of most Christians preaching and, in many churches, it is read aloud in its entirety over a three-year lectionary cycle.

The Quran

Unlike the Christian New Testament that is the product of several authors reflecting on the life and teachings of Jesus, the Islamic Quran was delivered to one man, Muhammad, over a period of 23 years. Of the 114 Suras (chapters) in the Quran, 86 were delivered during the early twelve years while Muhammad was still in Mecca. The remaining 28 were delivered to him after the migration to Medina.

Another critical difference is that, for Muslims, the Quran is an absolute divine revelation. Almost universally, Muslims believe that God sent each Sura to Muhammad via the archangel Gabriel. In the early years, the Suras were usually delivered to Muhammad when he was on prayer and fasting retreats in a cave on Mount Hira near Mecca. Later they came during similar retreats in other locations. Each time, he fell into a nearly suffocating trance and he often heard strange sounds and saw visions. Then, Gabriel would come to him and dictate God's words. Muhammad, who could neither read nor write, memorized the words and then recited them to one or more of his followers who either memorized them or wrote them down. After Muhammad's death, the Suras were all collected into a book by his closest followers and four "master copies" of the text were