

Other resources

A Common Word between Us and You, a letter to Christians from global Muslim leaders
www.acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en&page=option1
An Ecumenical Response by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA
<http://acommonword.com/en/christian-responses/11-an-ecumenical-response-to-a-common-word-between-us-and-you.html>
Response from Yale Divinity School Scholars
www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=1
Basic information <http://islam101.net/>
Beliefnet on Islam www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Islam/index.aspx
What Is Islam? <http://globalministries.org/mee/resources/what-is-islam.html>
Islam FAQs www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/200305/islam-faqs.htm

Brown, Stuart. *The Nearest in Affection: Towards a Christian Understanding of Islam*
Cragg, Kenneth. *The Call of the Minaret*
Esack, Farid. *The Qur'an: A Beginners Guide*
Esposito, John L. *Islam: the Straight Path*
Goddard, Hugh. *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*
Kaltner, John. *Ishmael Instructs Isaac: An Introduction to the Qur'an for Bible Readers*
Introducing the Qur'an: For Today's Reader
Rahman, Fazlur. *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 2nd ed.
Schimmel, Annemarie. *Islam: An Introduction*
Speight, R. Marston. *God Is One: the Way of Islam*, 2nd ed.
Volf, Miraslov. *Allah: A Christian Response*

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in the *Discover Islam* videos are those of the producers and may not necessarily reflect official positions of the Evangelical Lutheran in America or A Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.



Discover Islam DVD Series Study Guide



#6 Christians and Islam

Summary of DVD content

As is the case in other segments, Muslims explain their understanding of the Arabic term "islam" as a whole way of life leading to peace and wholeness through submission to God. With the call to prayer as backdrop, a series of Christian pastors talk about similarities between Islam and Christianity and conclude that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. Ecumenical leader the Rev. Dr. Shanta Premawardhana explains that "Allah" is the same name for God used by Arab Christians. "Allah" is the Arabic word for God.

Muslim scholars and practitioners describe Islam as a tradition that embraces all the biblical prophets. The video presents passages from the Qur'an on such biblical figures as Noah, Moses, Mary and Jesus. Although the Qur'an denies that Jesus is the divine Son of God, Islam affirms Jesus' miraculous conception, prophethood, and predicted return to participate in the Day of Judgment as a righteous ruler. Muslims also interpret Jesus' words in John 15 as foretelling the arrival of God's final prophet, Muhammad: "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf" (John 15:26).

Muhammad's life story is summarized, including the beginning of revelations from God at age 40 and the migration of the Muslim community to Medina in 622 C.E. Muslims believe that Muhammad, who followed the monotheist tradition of the biblical prophets, was sent to all humanity as the final prophet, referred to by Muslims as the "seal of the prophets." In Muslim perspective, the Qur'an records the exact words of God revealed to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel and is intended to serve as Islam's chief source of faith and practice.

The Prophet's sending of persecuted followers to asylum in predominantly Christian Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) is likely the world's first interfaith encounter between African Christians and Arab Muslims. The video concludes with Christian clergy calling for Muslims and Christians to live in harmony, while celebrating their similarities and respecting their differences, and an invitation to Christians to visit a mosque.

Elaboration on key topics

1. The **portrayal of Islam** in this segment and in the DVD series overall appears to focus on Sunni Islam as the norm. Such is understandable, since Sunnis make up approximately 85 percent of Muslims worldwide. At the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 C.E. his followers differed about his succession. Those who believed that Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, was the designee successor came later to be called "Shi' at 'Ali," meaning the party or group of Ali. **Shi'i Islam** shares with **Sunni Islam** many core beliefs and religious practices but differs on political governance and has additional rituals and feast days commemorating the martyrs of those early struggles. Shi'a Islam adds to the statement of faith, "Shahadah," the belief in the spiritual and political authority of the Imamate, the historical leaders called "imams," meaning for Shi'ites the succession of divinely gifted leaders from the Prophet's family.

The largest branch of Shi'a Islam is the Ithna Ashriyyah, or the "Twelvers," so called because they accept the notion of twelve imams. Also noteworthy are the Zaidis ("Fivers") of Yemen and the Ismailis ("Seveners"), with one branch led by the Aga Khan. All believe that the Imam is an infallible person inspired by God and having the sole authority to interpret the Qur'an. An American Ismaili Muslim active in interreligious relations is Eboo Patel, founder and executive director of the Chicago-based Interfaith Youth Core (ifyc.org).

The majority of Shi'i Muslims live in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan and Bahrain, with significant populations in Yemen, Lebanon and Afghanistan. In addition, both Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims can practice Islamic mystical approaches grouped under the umbrella term **Sufism**. Sufi mysticism is a very diverse popular movement within Islam. Some emphases include seeking direct knowledge of God, simplicity in lifestyle, meditation, devotional exercises, and membership in "orders" established by great Sufi teachers. Noteworthy Sufi Muslims are the 11th century scholar al-Ghazali and the 13th century poet Jalal al-Din Rumi, whose work inspires the "whirling dervishes." (Read more in John L. Esposito, "Islam: the Straight Path.")

2. In the DVD leaders from both faith groups answer "yes" to the central question, **"Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?"** The **Arabic name for God, "Allah,"** is indeed linguistically related to such biblical terms for God as "El" and "Elohim." Featured Muslim and Christian leaders also point out that there are **differences in how we think about God**, depending on scripture, religious tradition, and our own experience. Muslims stress the unity and oneness of God, while Christians understand God as not three deities but as Triune in essence. Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams has written of "God the Father, the Son

share a dinner and learn more about Islamic worship and daily practice. The pastor at Our Saviour's explained that they hosted the series so that members could know and understand their Muslim neighbors and so be able to love as Christ has loved.

6. Use the resources listed below to create a one-time event or adult study series for Christians and Muslims to do together. You could begin your program by asking each participant to prepare to 1) share the earliest personal memory of God and/or 2) bring an object with special significance for worship or a life event.

Find other similar ideas and resources from Southern California's Christian-Muslim Consultative Group, which has produced "Standing Together," a joint study with DVDs and discussion guides to "build bridges between Christians and Muslims." Learn more and order the materials at <http://thecmcg.org/>.

Learn more

ELCA resources

"Christian-Muslim Talking Points" www.elca.org/ecumenical/christianmuslimtalkingpoints

"Windows for Understanding: Jewish-Muslim-Lutheran Relations," especially pages 17-21 comparing Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Scroll down at www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Office-of-the-Presiding-Bishop/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations/Inter-Religious-Relations.aspx.

Journal of Lutheran Ethics: Multi-Religious Neighbors 2011
www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Journal-of-Lutheran-Ethics/Issues/May-June-2011.aspx

Journal of Lutheran Ethics: Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God? 2002
Walter R. Bouman
www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Journal-of-Lutheran-Ethics/Issues/March-2002/Do-Christians-and-Muslims-Worship-the-Same-God.aspx

Carol Schersten LaHurd
www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Journal-of-Lutheran-Ethics/Issues/February-2002/The-Lord-is-Near-to-All-Who-Call-on-Him.aspx

Ryan LaHurd
www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Journal-of-Lutheran-Ethics/Issues/February-2002/La-illaha-ilallah-There-is-no-God-but-God.aspx

Harold Vogelaar
www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Journal-of-Lutheran-Ethics/Issues/April-2002/Christians-and-Muslims-Do-They-Worship-the-Same-God.aspx

with you wherever you are; He sees all that you do; 5control of the heavens and earth belongs to Him. Everything is brought back to God. 6He makes night merge into day and day into night. He knows what is in every heart.

Surah 45.36-37

So praise be to God, Lord of the heavens and earth, Lord of the worlds. 37True greatness in the heavens and the earth is rightfully His: He is the Mighty, the Wise.

Surah 2.255

God: there is no god but Him, the Ever Living, the Ever Watchful. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. All that is in the heavens and in the earth belongs to Him. Who is there that can intercede with Him except by His leave? He knows what is before them and what is behind them, but they do not comprehend any of His knowledge except what He wills. His throne extends over the heavens and the earth; it does not weary Him to preserve them both. He is the Most High, the Tremendous.

NOTE: Qur'an quotations are from *The Qur'an* (Oxford World's Classics), M.A.S. Abdel Haleem translator.

3. A Muslim scholar calls the prophet "Muhammad a direct descendant from Abraham via Ishmael." Note that biblical Hagar and Ishmael are often considered, symbolically if not literally, to be the ancestors of Arab Muslims and Christians, and, by extension, the ancestors of all Muslims. **Read together Genesis 21:1-21 and 25:7-20.** What surprises you in these passages? What new insights into Islamic tradition can we glean from this part of Abraham's story?

4. Now that you've had a basic introduction to Islam and how it compares with Christianity, what questions do you have about Islamic faith and practice? Share with others how your own faith has affected the ways you relate to individuals from other religious traditions such as Judaism and Islam.

5. The DVD ends with a call to Muslims and Christians to move beyond tolerance to acceptance, respect, trust and community — and the invitation to Christians to visit a mosque. Discuss ways your congregation or group might engage local Muslims. Discuss whether "acceptance" of Muslims and appreciation for their beliefs and practices might in any way diminish Christian commitments.

Consider this experiential and educational model from Illinois: In winter 2011 more than 100 people, including Muslims from a nearby mosque, attended the series "Understanding Our Muslim Neighbors" at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in Arlington Heights. Topics included Islam 101, Why Do Interfaith, the History of Christian-Muslim Relations, the Qur'an, and Women in Islam. Presenters were seminary professors, Islamic scholars, and Muslim laypeople. The Islamic Society of the Northwest Suburbs invited the group to hold one session at its mosque to

and the Holy Spirit, that 'God exists in a threefold pattern of interdependent action.' But Christians, he insisted, uncompromisingly affirm that 'there is only one divine nature and reality.'" [Quoted by Miroslav Volf, "Allah and the Trinity; a Christian Response to Muslims," *The Christian Century*, February 25, 2011.] While the issues are complex, many Muslims and Christians can affirm that they worship the same God while acknowledging that there are very different understandings of God between their two traditions and indeed within each.

3. **Muslims generally believe that every word of the Qur'an in Arabic comes from God** via the angel Gabriel to the prophet Muhammad. That **theology of revelation** differs somewhat from the understanding of most Jewish and mainline Christian denominations that the **Bible is the inspired word of God expressed in the words of human beings** in their particular historical and cultural circumstances. Muslims also believe that God's revelation to Muhammad is like the revelation to the Hebrew prophets and Jesus. The Qur'an contains references to many of the historical figures in the Hebrew Old Testament, and considers them to be prophets of God, beginning with Adam. Many Muslims believe that the original revelation to Moses and Jesus as it appears in the Old and New Testaments has been corrupted by human writers, hence the need for a new revelation in the time of Muhammad. One very important point not stressed in the DVD is that for Islam **the Qur'an is verbatim revelation from God to the Prophet Muhammad as the speech or Word of God ("Kalam Allah"), and thus parallel to the place of Jesus Christ in Christianity.**

4. Many Christians are not aware that **Jesus** is one of the most important prophets mentioned in the Qur'an, which presents the story of his virginal conception and birth to Mary, as well as some of his miracles and future role on judgment day. In fact, many Muslims consider Jesus among the greatest prophets along with Muhammad and have great reverence for him. The Qur'an teaches that Jesus, although filled with God's spirit, was not the divine Son of God and, in the most common interpretation, did not die by crucifixion. The DVD presents the common Islamic view that Jesus was raised up to heaven alive before he could be crucified.

Whenever practicing Muslims say or hear the name of Jesus, they pronounce the honorific "peace be upon him." The video presents the Islamic interpretation that the coming **"advocate" or "paraclete" Jesus proclaims in John 15–16** is actually a prediction of the Prophet Muhammad, while acknowledging that Christians understand Jesus to be referring to the Holy Spirit. Using the Greek word "parakletos," Jesus in John's Gospel gives his followers the assurance that God's Spirit will act as their defender and consoler.

5. The DVD stresses **what Judaism, Christianity and Islam have in common** but also acknowledges that **important differences exist**. Because Christians and Jews have also received written scripture from God, the Qur'an refers to them as "People of the Book" and offers this challenge and invitation: *Say: 'People of the Book, let us arrive at a statement that is common to us all: we worship God alone, we ascribe no partner to Him, and none of us takes others beside God as lords.'* [Surah 3.64]

Judaism, Christianity and Islam share beliefs in the sovereignty of the one God of the Scriptures, as well as the convictions that God is active in history and that God provides law and guidance for the human community. All three religions emphasize prayer to sustain obedience to God's will in daily life. Judaism and Islam stress right practice (orthopraxy), while Christianity stresses right belief (orthodoxy). For example, Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims around the world all practice the same five pillars of the faith, even if the two groups disagree and even fight about some historical and political matters. On the other hand, Christians have formed denominations, divided among themselves in response to doctrinal disputes.

Finally, **both Muslim and Christian believers consider their own faith tradition to be a universal religion to be shared with all humankind.** This fact may account for some of the competitive spirit between the two religions. Perhaps to add a Jewish perspective, the DVD includes a married couple, identified as "Messianic Jews," who refer to the Qur'an as "another book of the New Testament." Jewish rabbis and scholars also would have valuable insights into how Islam compares with Judaism and about the place of the Qur'an in the history of revealed scriptures.

Perhaps the most significant theological difference between Christianity and Islam is the **comparative understanding of how God relates to sinful humankind.** Muslims believe human beings are inherently able to respond positively to God's guidance in the Qur'an. Thus salvation (or "success") in Islamic terms is mainly a matter of overcoming human weakness by submitting to God's will, staying on the "straight path," hoping for God's mercy, and consequently spending eternity in Paradise. Each human is accountable to God. Christians, on the other hand, believe that God's grace is required to reconcile sinful human beings to God. Salvation is then a matter of believing in and accepting God's grace-filled willingness to take on human flesh and to suffer and die and rise again on our behalf. For Muslims, the Christian notion of incarnation violates God's absolute transcendence and immanence. God's guidance is given by the scriptures and the Prophets and finally culminates in the Qur'an.

Contrary to many Christians' perceptions of Islam, the **Qur'an places a strong emphasis on God's mercy and compassion.** Each of its chapters begins with the

phrase, "In the name of God, the Merciful and compassionate." These attributes of mercy and compassion include the idea not only of forgiveness, but also of a bounteous mercy that sustains, protects and rewards people. God forgave Adam for his sin of disobedience. Thus the sin of Adam has no lasting effect upon subsequent generations, and there is no original sin in the Christian sense of that phrase. The Qur'an therefore emphasizes the moral responsibility and accountability of each believer before God, to whom we shall all return and by whom we shall all be judged.

To further explore these issues, read the ELCA's "**Christian-Muslim Talking Points**" at www.elca.org/ecumenical/christianmuslimtalkingpoints. Especially pertinent are the segments on Believing in God, The Bible and the Qur'an, Forgiveness and Salvation, and Jesus and Muhammad in the Qur'an.

Discussion questions

1. Read together the paragraph above on whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God. Has your opinion on this issue been altered by watching the DVD and learning more in the Key Topics section? How?

In the DVD the Rev. Allan Jones of Grace Episcopal Cathedral in San Francisco argues that many American Christians have lost the sense of God's sovereignty and need to gain some of Islam's great reverence for God and for God's "otherness." Discuss whether you agree or disagree and why.

2. Read the following passages from the Bible and the Qur'an and discuss any new insights they may provide on the question of whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God.

Read together Psalm 145, Deuteronomy 6:4-9, and Isaiah 55:8-9.

Read the "Shahada," the basic Muslim statement of faith and a pillar of Islam to be lived out daily: "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God."

Read these Qur'anic passages:

Surah 57.1-6

1Everything in the heavens and earth glorifies God—He is the Almighty, the Wise. 2Control of the heavens and earth belongs to Him; He gives life and death; He has power over all things. 3He is the First and the Last; the Outer and the Inner; He has knowledge of all things. 4It was He who created the heavens and earth in six Days and then established Himself on the throne. He knows what enters the earth and what comes out of it; what descends from the sky and what ascends to it. He is