

Muslims

Origins

Muhammad was born in 570 in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Muslims believe that he was visited by the angel Jibreel (Gabriel) around 610 while meditating in a cave on Mount Hira. From this time forward he began to receive revelations from Allah (God), and these came to form the content of the Qu'ran, the Muslim scripture. Muhammad began to gain a small number of followers, but many in Mecca opposed him and persecuted him. In 622 he fled Mecca and went with his followers to Medina. This event is called the Hijra (migration) and Muslims begin their calendars from this year. Within ten years he returned with his followers to conquer Mecca. Muhammad died in 632. After his death, Abu Bakr, a close companion of Muhammad, was chosen as caliph, or leader. However, a minority favoured Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law. Ali eventually became the fourth caliph, moving the capital from Medina to Kufa in Iraq. Over time, those who think Abu Bakr was the rightful caliph became known as Sunni Muslims. Those who favour Ali are called Shi'as (short for Shiat Ali, 'supporter of Ali').

The sayings of Muhammad are compiled in the Hadith. The Sunnah consists of not only the Hadith but also biographical details about Muhammad, called the Sira. This literature is traced back to his family, close associates and thousands of companions. Sunnis give equal weight to all this literature, but Shi'as give priority to the literature traced back to the family and close associates. Shi'as believe that authority was handed down through various leaders, Imams, of which Ali, the fourth caliph, was the first. They believe that the twelfth Imam, known as the Mahdi, went into hiding and will one day be revealed.

Today

There are around one billion Muslims worldwide, of which Sunnis comprise around eighty-five per cent. Ninety per cent of Muslims in Iran are Shi'a. Terrorist attacks against the West by Islamic extremists have impacted on the image of Islam, leading to a rise in Islamophobia. Mainstream Muslims are increasingly seeking to curtail extremist teachings within mosques. Muslims are also keen to reach out to other religions, attending a first forum between Muslim and Catholic officials at the Vatican in 2008.

What the mainstream says

- The Creator of the world is One, and He alone is worthy of worship.
- Angels exist and are the servants of Allah.
- The Books of God include the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospels and the Qu'ran.
- God sent messengers, including Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad.
- There will be a Day of Judgement.
- Fate is ordained by Allah, but man has free will.
- The Five Pillars consist of: *Shahadah*, reciting the Muslim profession of faith; *Salat*, praying five times each day; *Zakat*, paying an alms; *Sawm*, fasting during the month of Ramadan; *Haji*, pilgrimage to Mecca.

(Source: <http://islamworld.net>)

Suggested initial Scriptural approach

It is helpful to emphasise the Biblical doctrine that there is "one LORD" (Deut. 6:4) and not a Trinity, thus establishing some agreement from the outset. A key point to challenge is the belief that Muhammad is the greatest prophet. Whilst acknowledging that many opposed Christ during his mortal ministry, the greatness of Christ should be shown. Philippians 2:9, "God also hath highly exalted him", is a useful starting point.