

**Christians at the Roundtable of World Religions:
“What Can Christians Learn from Muslims?”
Genesis 21:0-20**

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Asadullah Nawabi was six-years-old when the Soviet Union invaded his home country of Afghanistan. Asad and his family escaped to the mountains in fear. They wandered there until they finally found a refugee camp where they lived for two years. Meanwhile, the Council of Churches in Crestwood, KY was trying to do its part in refugee resettlement. That’s how Asad, along with his mother and father and brothers and sisters, wound up in that little Kentucky town. I was the pastor of the Methodist church. Sandy was a first grade teacher in the public school. Asad, now eight, became her student. He could not speak a word of English. Through the years, our friendship with the Nawabi family has continued. We have been guests in their home for dinner. Shortly after 9/11, Asad called us asking for prayers. He was afraid for his brother’s life. His brother, who was a student at the University of Louisville, had been attacked on campus. When I was a patient at Vanderbilt Hospital, Asad came to see me. When I hid away to prepare for this series of sermons on world religions, I contacted Asad who graciously put me in touch with the president of his mosque for a most stimulating interview. So, what can Christians learn from Muslims?

THE HISTORY OF ISLAM

Muslims, Jews, and Christians all trace their ancestry to Abraham. In the Scripture lesson today, we recall the story of Abraham and Ishmael. Ishmael is Abraham’s son by his maidservant, Hagar. When Sarah, Abraham’s wife, becomes miraculously pregnant, she wants nothing to do with Hagar and Ishmael. So, Abraham sends the two of them into the desert of Beersheba. But God does not easily forget his own. When it looked as though the two of them would die of thirst, an angel of the Lord called Hagar from heaven and revealed a well of water. Then God made a promise, “*I will make Ishmael into a great nation.*” According to Muslims, that great nation is Islam.

In 570 A.D. Mohammed was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, a center of commerce and pagan worship. Mohammed’s name means “highly praised.” He became the founder of the Islamic faith, the youngest of the world’s five major religions. Mohammed’s life was marked by tragedy. His father died a few days before Mohammed was born. His mother died when Mohammed was six. Mohammed went to live with his grandfather who died when Mohammed was eight. Finally, landing with an uncle, Mohammed was forced to work at a very young age. In spite of a horrid childhood, he became a sensitive, honorable, duty-minded young man.

At the age of 25, Mohammed went to work for a woman named Khadijah, who owned a caravan business. Although she was fifteen years older than Mohammed, the two of them fell in love, were married, and bore many children.

Searching for meaning in his life, Mohammed began retreating to a cave on Mt. Hira to meditate and pray. During one of his meditations, an angel of the Lord pinned him down, told him his life was no longer his own, and instructed him to proclaim a new message to his pagan, polytheistic world that:

1. God is one, not many.
2. There is a moral consequence to licentious living.
3. The Lord regards all people equal.

In subsequent visits to that cave, the angel Gabriel pressed the word of the Lord into Mohammed's chest and the Quran, the holy scripture of Islam, came into being. This is remarkable in light of the fact that Mohammed, who was denied an education, could not read or write.

Mecca was hardly receptive to this new revelation of monotheism. After three years, Mohammed had less than forty converts. But Medina, a city to the north, recognized Mohammed's organizational ability and invited him to lead their city. As a statesman and politician, Mohammed and his followers flourished. Eight short years later they captured Mecca. By his death in 632 A.D., all of Arabia was under his control. By the end of the century, the Muslims had conquered Armenia, Persia, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, and parts of North Africa and Spain.

Like all religions, Islam is not united. It is impossible to fully understand the situation in Iraq without understanding the thought patterns of the Sunnis and the Shiites, a subject I must reserve for another day.

THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM FAITH

BELIEF: "There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet." Allah is the Arabic word for God. Allah is creator. Allah is powerful; Allah is merciful. Allah will hold us all accountable. There are two things that all Muslims believe: all humans are to do what is right and get away from what is evil for the day of reckoning will come. O that Christians could keep it so simple and straightforward. Belief is important.

PRAYER: Muslims pray five times a day facing Mecca, heads bowed all the way to the ground, prostrating themselves before God. As I listened to Pasha, the president of the mosque, describe the prayer life of a faithful Muslim, I was ashamed of my own prayer habits. A few words in the morning; a little discussion at night; a plea for help during the day and I go my way. No wonder Christians are so impotent when it comes to prayer.

FASTING: Once a year, for the entire month of Ramadan, Muslims fast from dawn to dusk. I remember playing ping-pong with a young Egyptian when I was visiting there. We were in the middle of a game, when the clock struck the hour.

My friend dropped his paddle and said, "I must go. The fast is ended."

CHARITY: Two and a half percent of all one's assets goes to the poor and needy. At first I thought that wasn't much. I've always given at least ten percent of my income to the Church. Then I realized that the standard had to do with assets, not income, and directly to the poor and the needy, not the institutional church or denominational bureaucracy, or pastoral salaries. It might cause us to rethink our patterns of charity.

PILGRIMAGE: Muslims are to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime if they are physically able. You may have noticed in the news that a recent pilgrimage drew such a crowd that some persons were unfortunately crushed and killed.

HOW CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS DIFFER

THE QURAN: There are 114 books of God's revelation to Mohammed. The translation that I have says in the introduction that The Old Testament was given to the Jews. The New Testament was given to the Christians. The final Testament (the Quran) was given to Mohammed for all humanity. Christians would not agree with that. In fact, our understanding of the Bible is different than a Muslim's understanding of the Quran. The Quran does not contain the word of God as understood by multiple Biblical authors. Muslims believe the Quran is the word of God as dictated to Mohammed.

JESUS CHRIST: There is much in the Quran about Jesus. It proclaims the virgin birth, but denies the crucifixion; therefore, there is no need for resurrection. In preparation for this sermon, I listened to a sermon by Dr. Ergun Caner, a conservative Christian, who converted to Christianity from Islam. One thing Dr. Caner said hit me hard. He said that as long as he was a Muslim, he believed that every Christian hated every Muslim. Is that the message Christians are communicating to 1.3 billion people in the world? If that is what Muslims believe, how can we ever connect that message with Jesus who said to his followers that love is the ethic of our faith? Not just loving those who love you. Anybody can do that. *"But I say to you, love your enemies. Bless those who persecute you. Bless and curse not."*

In the midst of war, that may seem difficult. But Stephen Tschiderer, an Army medic, found a way to practice his faith on the battlefield. While on a dangerous patrol in the streets of Baghdad, Tschiderer was shot in the chest by an enemy sniper. He was knocked to the ground, but his bullet proof vest saved his life. Moments later, Tschiderer came face-to-face with the sniper who had tried to kill him. The sniper, too, had been wounded in the gunfire and was in desperate need of medical attention. Tschiderer had a lot of choices. He could have roughed him up and no one would have said anything. Certainly, he could have walked on by like the priest and the Levite did in the Good Samaritan story and no one would have asked a question. But this U.S. soldier chose not to do that.

Instead, he knelt at the side of the sniper and dressed the wounds of the man who tried to take his life and helped him head to a hospital (USA TODAY 7/15/05). Have we that kind of love for others? Isn't this what Jesus taught Christians to do?

JIHAD (Holy War): In the greater sense, Jihad is a battle against the enemy within. As I listened to Pasha describe the battle of the soul, I thought of one of my favorite little poems which goes like this:

In my earthly temple, there's a crowd,
There's one who's humble, one who's proud.
There's one who's sorry for his sins,
And another who, unrepentant, sits and grins.
From much corroding care I would be free,
If I could determine which is really me.

Nationally, Jihad has been interpreted in Islamic countries as a means of self-defense, to be declared by the chief of state, much like the Just War Theory pursued by the United States. It is almost exactly the same.

But Muslims have their extremists. Christians do too. Remember, we produced Jim Jones. In February 1998, Osama Bin Laden and four other leaders of radical Islamic groups in various countries issued a fatwa, or religious ruling, calling for Jihad against the Crusader-Zionist Alliance. In part it reads, "In compliance with God's orders, we issue the following fatwa to all Muslims: Killing Americans and their allies, civilians and military, is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it." That comes across to Muslims as something awful. It really does.

I pray that we Americans will not respond to this threat by elevating present conflicts into a Holy War. Holy War is an oxymoron. There is no such thing as a holy war. At best, war may be a necessary evil, but it is not holy. Don't cast it in religious terms because it neither fits Muslim or Christian religion. So, let us do what we have to do recognizing that our faith calls us to a higher ground. May God help us!

My friend Asad sent me an email a few days ago. In part he wrote, "As a Muslim, I am ingrained to believe that to love God is to love mankind so all God's creation can be revered and respected. Thanks for trying to remove misinformation that taints people's hearts with hatred."

Let us pray: O God, revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ, we come to worship you today. We confess to you that we cannot love as you love, and so we pray for a fresh anointing of your Holy Spirit. Teach us how to love one another, even the people who are close to us, and then by your mighty sweep of grace, give us a love for all the world. And O Lord, let us rise out of the ashes of pain and brokenness to walk as your children, respectful for all your creation. Amen.

