The Crescent and the Cross: Understanding Islam
A sermon by Rev. Dr. David Clark
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We're blessed to live in one of the most diverse cities in the nation. If we are to follow Jesus' command to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, it seems that we should try to understand and appreciate our neighbors' perspectives, which are often rooted in religious traditions. To do our part in overcoming the divisiveness that grips our age, we do well to learn as much as we can, so today, we continue our sermon series on world religions.

We aim to increase our understanding of major religions. By exploring their beliefs and practices, we'll uncover common misperceptions, see where there's common ground with Christians, and point out where we diverge. We'll also reflect on aspects these traditions emphasize that can help us become better Christians.

This series came at the suggestion of some of our members. And it comes with a caveat: although I've studied all these faiths, I am no expert in them. If you ask any two random people of any faith about their experience and practice, they may have widely different takes. So, we go forward with the basics of each faith, hoping it will whet your appetite to explore further and begin a conversation with your neighbors.

Islam's bad reputation in America

Today, we turn to Islam, the second-largest religion, with approximately 1.8 billion adherents or over a quarter of the world's population. Yet, it's one of the West's most reviled and misunderstood religions.

A relative once informed me with all sincerity, "All Muslims want to kill all Americans. It's part of their religion."

"Where'd you get that? Have you ever studied Islam?"

"That's what they say."

It's a prevailing misconception. With an estimated 15,000 Muslims living among us in Long Beach, it would be far better to understand what Islam is really about.

The Same God.

Some are surprised to learn that Muslims, Jews, and Christians all worship the same God and trace our religious heritage back to the Old Testament patriarch

Abraham. Abraham had two sons, Isaac and Ishmael. Jews trace their ancestry to Isaac and Muslims to Ishmael. As part of the same faith family tree, you would think we'd find a way to get along better.

Muslims claim the God of Abraham, and Jesus whom they call Allah, Arabic for "The God." They believe God is the supreme, sovereign God of the entire universe. Like Judaism, Islam insists on complete monotheism. There are no other gods. They don't have time for a concept like the Christian trinity, which states that God is three in one. "No!" They say. God is one. End of discussion.

Like us, they view the character of God to be merciful. It is traditional for a Muslim who is giving a speech or writing to begin with the words, "In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate."

They believe God orchestrates all events and has a plan for everyone and everything, holds humans responsible for our choices, and will reward us with either heaven or hell at the final judgment.

The Qur'an says that when a person dies, the body returns to the Earth, but the soul remains conscious in the grave. The good get a pre-taste of paradise, and the wicked suffer in the grave until the resurrection when God issues the final judgment.

They believe in angels and other supernatural beings, including the djinn, spiritual beings who can be either good or evil and try to influence human behavior.

The Prophet Muhammad

Islam is the youngest of the major religions. Its heritage is traced back to the Prophet Muhammad, who was born about 570 C.E in Mecca. Orphaned at a young age, his uncle brought him into his caravanning business, where he became successful and regarded as intelligent and absolutely trustworthy. It allowed him to engage people from various religions, including Christians and Jews. He became convinced that this God was the one real one.

At age 25, he married a wealthy 40-year-old widow. Dismayed with the state of the world and searching for answers to life's most perplexing problems, he withdrew to the hill country and received a series of divine revelations from the angel Gabriel. He came home and told people and got some early converts and he kept going back the next 20 years for more revelations.

His community faced rejection and he got kicked out of Mecca, established the religion in Medena and then came back to take Mecca.

He committed these teachings to memory. Because he was illiterate, he later recited them to a scribe who wrote them down, and they became the Qur'an, their sacred scriptures.

He saw himself as something of a stenographer. These are teachings from God, not from him. Muhammed is considered the great, fully human, not divine, prophet. Islam recognizes the prophets from the Old Testament, regards Jesus as a prophet, and accepts prophecies of other religions. Muhammed is considered the final prophet, the culmination of what all the other prophets were getting at.

The Qur'an

The Qur'an is their scripture. Qur'an means "recitation" because it is the recitation of what Gabriel told him. It is written in Arabic, and Muslims believe a blessing comes through reading the Qur'an in Arabic but not in other translations. It is roughly the same length as the New Testament. And people are encouraged to memorize it--all of it. Any person who does this is given the honorific title *hafiz*.

It's a bit confusing because it is not in chronological order but rather arranged in the length of its sections, with the longest sections going first. This is similar to how the prophetic books are arranged in the Old Testament. But if you read it, you'd find a familiar cast of characters: Adam and Eve, Moses, King David, and Jesus, who is mentioned 70 times. Jesus is held in high esteem, only eclipsed by Muhammad.

The Five Pillars

Those things that one must do to be considered a "good Muslim" are usually called "the five pillars" of Islam.

1. **Repetition of the Creed**. Every day, and as often as possible one is to recite the creed, "There is no God but Allah; Muhammed is his messenger." This is the core. Reciting this is what makes one a Muslim. Implicit in the creed is an attitude of submission to God's will. Islam literally means submission. It's similar to how Jesus taught us to submit to God's will. "Not mine, by thy will be done."
2. **Daily Prayer**. Muslims are expected to pray five times at appointed times each day. They pray both prescribed ritual prayers and lift up their personal concerns. In many Muslim communities, someone calls out to the community or another signal sounds to indicate that it is time to adopt a posture of submission facing Mecca. Men and women are not to pray together because of the possibility of inappropriate contact.
3. **Almsgiving**. Helping others is a central tenant; charity is obligatory. They are to give 2.5-10% of one's wealth, not just income. So, every year, you base

your giving on the value of your house, portfolio, and assets. Don't forget your car's worth!

4. **Fasting**. Every year during the month of Ramadan, believers are expected to fast (the month is based on a lunar calendar like Easter; it isn't the same from one year to the next). During daylight hours, they abstain from eating, drinking, smoking, and sex. When Ramadan concludes, there is a three-day feast. It is believed that Allah will pardon the sins of all those who complete the fast.
5. **Pilgrimage/hajj.** Everyone is expected to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once. Perhaps you've seen images of throngs of people circling a black building called Ka'ba. They are to circle it seven times and kiss the sacred black stone.

Taboos and gender.

Some behaviors are taboo, like drinking alcohol, eating pork, and gambling.

Most Muslim societies observe traditional roles for men and women. Men as breadwinners and women as caregivers. Both are expected to dress modestly, but women are to wear the hijab head covering to emphasize devotion to God. Inheritance usually goes to men. Many Muslims, work to reconcile and reform traditional teachings with contemporary understandings of gender equality and justice.

Worship

In addition to daily prayers, Muslims gather in mosques on Fridays for corporate worship. Similarities between Muslim and Christian worship include communal prayer, scripture readings, and sermons or reflections. Usually, hymns aren't part of it.

Muslim communities have an imam instead of ordained pastors or priests. An imam is akin to a lay leader or prayer leader who leads the congregation in prayer, delivers sermons, and provides religious guidance. Imams do not typically undergo formal ordination.

Variations within Islam

Just as there are variations in Christianity, Islam has two main branches: the Sunnis and Shi'ites.

Most Muslims hate ISIS and radicalism and look with horror at what others are doing in the name of their religion, the same way we cringe at the horrible stuff some Christians do.

The Mystical Element

Like every religion, Islam has a mystical tradition focused more on direct experience with God. Sometimes, Muslims embrace a more ascetic life and emphasize discipline, poverty, and abstinence from worldly pleasures. Rumi, whom many Christian mystics quote, was an Islamic mystic.

A religion of peace, not violence.

Islam is a religion of peace because its teachings emphasize principles of justice, compassion, and harmony among individuals and communities. Part of the root word for Islam comes from the same word as Shalom, which means peace. Peace is conceived as more than the absence of conflict. It is about promoting justice and well-being for all people.

Regarding violence, Islam condemns aggression and emphasizes self-defense within strict guidelines. Instances where violence is mentioned in Islamic texts, are often contextual and relate to self-defense or historical events rather than advocating for indiscriminate violence.

Jihad.

In Islamic tradition, Jihad primarily refers to the concept of "struggle" or "striving" in the path of God. It encompasses personal and collective efforts to live a righteous life and improve society. This includes the internal struggle to overcome personal moral shortcomings, known as the "greater jihad."

The external struggle to defend the faith is known as the "lesser jihad." While some extremists interpret jihad as a justification for violence against perceived threats, including cultural and ideological conflicts with the West, this view is a distortion of its broader meaning.

Don't judge a religion by its extremists.

It is not fair to judge Islam as a whole by the actions of these extremists, just as it is unfair to judge Christianity based on its violent extremists. Some people will say, "The Quran says to do such and such. But they take it out of context and cherry pick verses. Have you seen the stuff in our Bible? No. We move beyond that stuff to get to the loving, peaceful essence of it.

So, no. All Muslims do not want to kill all Americans.

Conclusion

Every year, there are many attacks and unprovoked hostility and discrimination on Muslims by Christians in the US. It has spiked since the Israel-Hamas war broke out. Our Muslim neighbors should know this church isn't one that is promoting Islamophobia but one committed to increasing understanding and common ground. Things that inspire me to be better about my faith are the idea of submission, frequent prayer, commitment to helping the poor, and frequently invoking the mercy of God.