

# A SOLDIER'S GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

CHAPLAIN (MAJOR) WALT HOSKINS

The sights and sounds of Muslim culture can be surprising to the average American Soldier. I'll never forget being awakened by the prayer call early in the morning when I was deployed to Saudi Arabia. Many of the areas where Soldiers deploy are Muslim countries which are heavily influenced by Islam. It is imperative in the day of the "strategic private" for Soldiers to have a basic understanding of Islam.

## Five Pillars of Islam

The Islamic faith consists of these five key principles or pillars:

**1. Confession (Shahadah).** The primary confession of faith for Muslims world wide is "there is no god but Allah, and Mohammed is the messenger of God." This statement identifies people as Muslims. Converts need only repeat it twice in front of another Muslim to be considered a follower of Islam, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Islam* edited by John L. Esposito.

**2. Prayer (Salat).** Prayer is central to the Islamic faith. Muslims are supposed to pray five times a day beginning at "day break (salat al-fajr), noon (salat al-duhr), midafternoon (salat al-asr), sunset (salat al-maghreb), and evening (salat al-isha)." It is not uncommon for Soldiers to hear the call to prayer from loudspeakers atop the minarets (mosque towers). Most people are unable to get to the mosque five times a day and hence are permitted to pray at home, at work, or even beside a road, but always facing Mecca. In some cultures, restaurants and businesses close during the prayers; in other cultures there doesn't appear to be an interruption in the

daily activity. The Muslim will often pray using his/her prayer rug and will recite the prayers while standing, kneeling and bowing with the forehead touching the ground in submission to God. During a deployment to an Islamic country, it is both common and customary for Soldiers to see Muslims praying.

**3. Alms (Zakat).** Giving to the needy is a significant duty for Muslims. It is one of their ways of taking care of each other. Muslims are required to give 2.5 percent of their income in Alms directly to the poor and are encouraged to give generously to additional causes if they are able, according to *Inside the Community: Understanding Muslims Through Their Traditions* by Phil Parshall.

**4. Fasting (Sawm) during Ramadan.** A Department of the Army message is circulated every year preceding Ramadan to inform the command about the practice of fasting Muslim Soldiers. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims are expected to fast during the hours of daylight and are supposed to abstain from sex, food, and drink. There are always exceptions to the rule, but generally everyone who is able fasts for the whole month. Soldiers should be courteous and not eat or drink in front of fasting Muslims during this holy month.

*Soldiers with the 1st Battalion, 17th Infantry Regiment, 172nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, help secure the street outside of a mosque in Baghdad, Iraq, September 2, 2006.*

MC2(SW) Eli J. Medellin, USN



**5. Hajj “(Pilgrimage) to Mecca.** All adult Muslims are required to make the pilgrimage at least once in their lives if they are physically and financially able. Every year, Saudi Arabia swells with two million Muslim pilgrims who transit the kingdom en route to Mecca. *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* also states that during this pilgrimage, Muslims do certain acts such as circling the Kaaba seven times, “running back and forth seven times between two small hills near the Kaaba” (symbolizing Abraham’s wife-Hagar’s search for water), “processing to the plains of Arafat,” “scaling the sides of Mount Mercy, where Mohammed delivered his farewell message,” stoning Satan (symbolically) seven times and sacrificing animals. Muslims believe that God forgives all previous sins if the Hajj is performed correctly by the worshipper. Soldiers may also witness lesser pilgrimages, particularly in Shiite areas.

In addition to the Five Pillars of Islam, Muslims hold to specific doctrinal teachings. Many religions have creeds or statements of faith which provide a brief explanation of their particular beliefs. Islam also has a statement called the “Six Articles of Faith.” A person must affirm their beliefs in the items listed to be a Muslim:

- \* One God;
- \* The angels of God;
- \* The books of God, especially the Qur’an;
- \* The prophets of God, especially Muhammad;
- \* The Day of Judgment (or the afterlife); and
- \* The supremacy of God’s will (or predestination).

“This list is sometimes shortened to Five Articles of Faith, which leaves off belief in the supremacy of God’s will,” according to religionfacts.com.

There are lots of additional nuances of Islam, but the Five Pillars and Six Articles are key points for the Soldier to know about Islam. There are also some key differences and similarities between Christianity and Islam that are worth examining (see Figure 1).

### **Similarities:**

**1. Monotheism.** Both religions claim to be monotheistic. Muslims claim, however, that Christianity is pagan and corrupted and is not monotheistic since the deity of Jesus Christ is problematic to them. Both share the similarity of having central figures such

as God, Jesus or Mohammed.

**2. Rituals.** As the two largest religions in the world, both share similar worship practices and rituals, such as prayer, prayer beads, fasting, preaching, charity, and evangelizing.

**3. Holy books.** Islam has three main sources of inspiration and instruction: the Holy Qur’an, the Hadith, and the Sunnah. Christianity also has the Holy Bible (which for some branches is the only source of authority) and official teachings or doctrines of the church.

**4. Concern for the poor.** Both religions attempt to help poor people through networks of charities and organizations.

**5. Variety of expressions, from nominal to fundamental.** Our shared humanity is evident in our tendency to be religious. However, in both the west and Islamic cultures one can easily discern that everybody is not a devout Christian or Muslim. America western culture varies from the atheist to the Amish with everything in between. Muslim countries also vary in intensity of religious belief. A 2007 document produced in Jordan, *Jihad and the Muslim Law of War*, lists five categories of Muslims.

a. Secular fundamentalists believe that religion is private and that it should have no role in government or public life. They embrace western culture and reject Islamic culture.

b. Modernist and modern secularists believe that Islam should adjust to the times and embrace western culture.

c. Traditionalists, Islam is the standard for life and faith in a sensible way and maintains flexibility with government structure.

d. Puritanical literalists or Islamists desire to change Muslim culture and government back to what it was like when Mohammed lived.

e. Jihadists have a very narrow view of Islam and regard others besides themselves as apostate. This group is a very small percentage of Muslims world-wide, with “less than one hundredth of one percent of all Muslims or less than one in every 10,000 Muslims” are takfiris, as stated on the Web site ammanmessage.com. This relatively insignificant number of people may seem hard for the average Soldier to believe, considering the amount of contact that Soldiers have with extremists. It appears that this minority Muslim group is attracted to fighting the infidel in Iraq, thereby giving them greater visibility.

**6. Idea of world expansion.** Both groups are interested in expanding the influence of their religions. Christians try to expand the spiritual kingdom of God by sharing the gospel to all who will hear but do not force conversions or attempt to control governments. Muslims as well have a concept of world expansion that appears to have a territorial (Taliban, Al-Qaeda) element to it.

**7. Historic figures.** Both religions share a common key figure, Abraham, and are considered “Abraham religions.” Moses, Jesus, and Ishmael are additional common figures. Islam and Christianity share some common stories as well but with character changes. In Christianity, it is believed that Abraham took his son *Isaac* up to the mountain to be sacrificed and was spared when God provided a ram. Islam tells the story that Abraham took his son *Ishmael* up to the mountain to be sacrificed and was spared by the ram. Christianity teaches that Jesus was crucified; Islam says someone else was crucified in Jesus’ place.

**8. Holy sites.** Both religions have their own locations that they consider to be holy: Jerusalem, Medina, Mecca, the Vatican, Bethlehem, the Mosque etc. Shiia Islam has additional holy sites that we often hear about in the news, such as Karbala (where Ali and his companions were murdered in 681). Soldiers should always be aware of which sites or structures are considered “holy” in their area.

**9. The two greatest commandments.** Both religions share the idea of “love of God and love of neighbor.” *A Common Word between Us and You* is a movement among moderate Muslims to call both Christians and Muslims to agree on these two commands that both groups have in common. This Muslim movement was in response to Pope Benedict XVI’s Regensburg address of September 13, 2006. Time alone will tell if this effort will have an affect on the world in general and on our Soldiers who are on the front line battling Islamic Jihadists. Soldiers should guard against the idea that every Muslim is a terrorist. In fact, Soldiers will encounter more moderate Muslims than terrorists and should seek common ground through these two important commandments.

### **Differences:**

#### **1. Jesus Christ.**

In Islam, Jesus Christ was the Messiah born of the Virgin Mary and was a prophet

**Figure 1 — Religion Facts Chart Comparing Christianity and Islam**

<b>HISTORY &amp; STATS</b>	<b>CHRISTIANITY</b>	<b>ISLAM</b>
Date founded	c. 30 AD	622 CE
Place founded	Palestine	Saudi Arabia
Founders & early leaders	Jesus, Peter, Paul	Muhammad
Original languages	Aramaic and Greek	Arabic
Major location today	Europe, North and South America	Middle East, Southeast Asia
Adherents worldwide today	2 billion	1.3 billion
Current size rank	Largest in the world	Second largest in the world
Major branches	Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant	Sunni, Shiite
<b>RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY</b>	<b>CHRISTIANITY</b>	<b>ISLAM</b>
Sacred text	Bible = Old Testament (Jewish Bible) + New Testament	Qur'an (Koran)
Inspiration of sacred text	Views vary: literal Word of God, inspired human accounts, or of human origin only	Literal Word of God
Status of biblical prophets	True prophets	True prophets
Status of Jewish Bible	Canonical	Noncanonical but useful as a (corrupted) inspired text
Status of Jewish Apocrypha	Canonical (Catholic); useful but noncanonical (Protestant)	Noncanonical
Status of New Testament	Canonical	Noncanonical but useful as a (corrupted) inspired text
Summaries of doctrine	Apostle's Creed, Nicene Creed	Six Articles of Faith
Religious law	Canon law (Catholics)	Sharia
Other written authority	Church fathers, church councils, ecumenical creeds (all branches); papal decrees, canon law (Catholics)	Hadith
<b>RITUALS &amp; PRACTICES</b>	<b>CHRISTIANITY</b>	<b>ISLAM</b>
House of worship	Church, chapel, cathedral, basilica, meeting hall	Mosque
Day of worship	Sunday	Friday
Religious leaders	Pope, priest, bishop, archbishop, patriarch, pastor, minister, preacher, deacon	Imams
Major sacred rituals	Baptism, communion (Eucharist)	Five Pillars: prayer, pilgrimage, charity, fasting, confession of faith
Head covered during prayer?	Generally no	Yes
Central religious holy days	Lent, Holy Week, Easter	Eid-al-Fitr, Eid-al-Adha, month of Ramadan
Other holidays	Christmas, saints days	Mawlid, Ashura
Major symbols	Cross, crucifix, dove, anchor, fish, alpha and omega, chi rho, halo	Crescent, name of Allah in Arabic

BELIEFS & DOCTRINE	CHRISTIANITY	ISLAM
Ultimate reality	One creator God	One creator God
Nature of God	Trinity - one substance, three persons	Unity - one substance, one person
Other spiritual beings	Angels and demons	Angels, demons, jinn
Revered humans	Saints, church fathers	Prophets, imams (especially in Shia Islam)
Identity of Jesus	Son of God, God incarnate, savior of the world	True prophet of God, whose message has been corrupted
Birth of Jesus	Virgin birth	Virgin birth
Death of Jesus	Death by crucifixion	Did not die, but ascended bodily into heaven (a disciple died in his place)
Resurrection of Jesus	Affirmed	Denied, since he did not die
Second coming of Jesus	Affirmed	Affirmed
Mode of divine revelation	Through Prophets and Jesus (as God Himself), recorded in Bible	Through Muhammad, recorded in Qur'an
Human nature	"Original sin" inherited from Adam - tendency towards evil	Equal ability to do good or evil
Means of salvation	Correct belief, faith, good deeds, sacraments (some Protestants emphasize faith alone)	Correct belief, good deeds, Five Pillars
God's role in salvation	Predestination, various forms of grace	Predestination
Good afterlife	Eternal heaven	Eternal paradise
Bad afterlife	Eternal hell, temporary purgatory (Catholicism)	Eternal hell
View of the other religion	Islam is respected as a fellow monotheistic religion, but Muhammad is not seen as a true prophet	Christians are respected as "People of the Book," but they have mistaken beliefs and only partial revelation

Continuation of Figure 1

who preached the truth. He was NOT crucified for the sins of mankind but will return again in the future.

In Christianity, Jesus Christ was the Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary; Second Person of the Holy Trinity; a Prophet; Priest; and King who is the Truth, who died on the cross for the sins of mankind, rose again on the third day, and will return again in the future.

This difference in understanding of the nature of Jesus Christ is very important. In Christianity, Jesus is the Son of God and equal with God. In Islam, Jesus is a lesser messenger than Mohammed.

On the surface, this may appear to be only a slight difference since both religions recognize the significant role of Jesus Christ. However, this is a monumental theological difference that has been an impasse for 1300 years.

### 2. Mohammed.

In Islam, Mohammed is the last prophet who was given the Qur'an through the

Angel Gabriel. Mohammed preached the truth (correcting Judaism and Christianity which became corrupted over time) and is the example in faith and life for all Muslims, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Islam*.

In Christianity, Mohammed is the founder of Islam, a separate religion and not the corrected version of Judaism or Christianity; he serves no role in the lives of Christians.

One Muslim man I talked with took great offense at the resistance of people in the west to give their children Muslim names. He said that Muslims give their children biblical names such as Moses, Jesus, and Abraham, but Christians never named their sons Mohammed. He saw this as a form of prejudice against Muslims when, in reality, it reflects the fact that Mohammed does not have a place in Christianity.

### 3. Worship.

While both religions consider themselves to be monotheistic, and have

common practices, the worship experiences of the two are very different. At the mosque worshippers wear no shoes, sometimes wash themselves and their feet prior to entering, stand in rows and bow down on the floor during their prayers. Women may be present in the back or in the balcony but not among the male worshippers (for the purpose of modesty). There are no musical instruments or chairs, and worshippers gather by a call to prayer from the tower (minaret). Friday is the main day for worship, and in my travels and deployments, everything came to a halt to accommodate religious services on Fridays.

Many Soldiers are familiar with the various expressions of Christian worship services which are usually accompanied by musical instruments and attended by men and women seated together. Worshippers keep their shoes on their feet and usually do not go through a cleansing process before entering the church. Often times

worshippers gather to the sound of bells ringing from the bell tower (however, this is a dated practice).

#### 4. Cultural assimilation of the religion.

This is a big difference between western culture and Muslim culture. Most, if not all, of the west is in a post-Christian era. While a large number of Americans claim to be Christian, it doesn't appear to affect the daily lives or patterns of people. There is a tendency in western culture for people to compartmentalize their lives. We have a work persona, a church persona, an internet identity, a married identity, and an off-duty persona, and we like to keep the compartments separate. There does not appear to be such a drastic degree of compartmentalization in the life of a Muslim. Islam affects all areas of life for the Muslim including dress, speech, work, diet, fate, etc.

#### 5. Religion and Government.

Most westerners grew up in an era of "separation of church and state." We have watched the political and legal processes which dealt with issues such as the terms "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance and "In God We Trust" on our money. The Infantryman who serves in the Islamic world quickly finds himself in a society that is deeply affected by religion and where the civilian population is often more loyal to the sheiks, clerics, imams, and mullahs than to elected officials or the rule of law.

It seems that much of the domestic issues in Iraq seem to center on the tensions between the Sunnis and the Shiites. The news stories about a possible civil war in Iraq focus on the Mehdi Army, the Shiite Militia under the leadership of Muqtada al-Sadr, and the Shiite struggle for power in the Sunni-dominated government have had a lot of press. However, this is not a recent development. The tension between Sunnis and Shiites goes back about 1,300 years.

The Prophet Mohammed established Islam and was the sole source of power and authority regarding the religion. Mohammed did not leave clear instructions about who would assume leadership of the religion when he died. Consequently, there has been a struggle between the two groups of Muslims who both claim to be the legitimate leaders of Islam.

The Shiites believe in a family based succession of leadership from Mohammed beginning with his son-in-law, Ali, who was the fourth successor (caliph) back in 632. World-wide Shiites are the minority sect of Islam, accounting for only 10-15 percent of all Muslims, and who live primarily in Iran. The Shiites have some religious practices that differ from the Sunnis that Soldiers may encounter in Iraq, such as additional pilgrimages to Shiite holy shrines that have been the center of violence between the two groups.

The Sunnis, on the other hand, believed that heirs of the first four caliphs, not merely Ali, were legitimate religious/political leaders (caliph). Today the primary concern for the Sunnis is not lineage but "worthiness of religious leadership." The struggle over legitimate authority and power is at the root of the internal conflict in Iraq. While Sunnis represent about 85 percent of Muslims worldwide- they are not the majority sect in Iraq. The Iraqi population is approximately 65 percent Shiite and 35 percent Sunni. Saddam Hussein and the Baathist party were mostly Sunni, and many of their victims, including the attacks against villages in southern Iraq after Gulf War 1, were Shiites. Given the religious history of the Sunnis and Shiites, it seems that much of the aggression between the two groups is more political than religious.

Many political struggles are disguised as religious turmoil when in reality the religion is being used by factions to create division,

i.e. Catholic vs. Protestant issues in Northern Ireland. Al-Qaeda and other insurgents will attempt to manipulate tribal, religious, and cultural differences to weaken Iraq and attempt to establish an Islamist state like they had in Afghanistan.

#### Conclusion

Religious expression, practices, dress and customs of Islam can be very confusing to the average Soldier. However, Soldiers must overcome culture shock and realize that people everywhere take their religion seriously and are personally affronted when they feel disrespected or mocked. Even non-religious Americans get up in arms about taking "in God we trust" off our currency or taking the phrase "Under God" out of the "Pledge of Allegiance" because it is an insult to our way of life. Winning the hearts and minds of the people means applying the Army Value of Respect when it comes to understanding indigenous religions.

**Chaplain (MAJ) Walt Hoskins** is currently serving as the ethics instructor with Combined Arms and Tactics Directorate, U.S. Army Infantry Center and School at Fort Benning, Georgia. He is also senior pastor of CrossRoads Contemporary Service at the post's Follow Me Chapel. His previous assignments include serving as the regimental chaplain for the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy at Fort Bliss, Texas; brigade chaplain for the 35th Air Defense Artillery Brigade and task force chaplain for 5-7 ADA Battalion. A list of references for this article is on file and available through *Infantry Magazine*.



SSG Sean A. Foley

*An Iraqi policeman with the 5th Brigade, 2nd Division, Iraqi National Police pulls security at a mosque during a patrol in the Karkh District in Baghdad March 27, 2007.*