



## ISLAM: OUR ABRAHAMIC COUSIN

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In our last article, we discussed Judaism, which Pope John Paul II called “our sister religion.” Now, we turn our attention to the other Abrahamic religion, one that the Holy Father called “our cousin.” This religion is Islam. Like Jews and Christians, they believe in absolutely one God. Though they believe that Muhammad was the last of the Prophets (and with him, prophecy was “sealed”), they see him in the same line as the Jewish prophets, Jesus and the apostles. They honor Jesus as the greatest prophet, next to Muhammad himself. They believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, though they do not believe he is the Son of God, nor do they believe that he was crucified (God would never allow his prophet to die like that). Rather, Jesus was taken to heaven, from whence he would return to judge the living and the dead at the end of the world.

Muhammad was born in the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D., and Muslims believe, received a call from God, through the angel Gabriel, to take a message to the Arab people. His message was simple: There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God. This is the *shahada*, the Islamic creed. To Muslims, there is no greater sin than to assign another being equality with God: this is idolatry, in Arabic, *shirk*. *Shirk*, like the Christian notion of idolatry, is more than simply bowing down before false gods: anything that gets in the way of your relationship with God is *shirk*. This is similar to Jesus’ saying that no one can serve two masters.

Islam is founded on Five Pillars: recitation of the *shahada*, prayer five times per day (morning, mid-day, afternoon, evening and night), giving 2.5 % of their total accumulated wealth to the mosque and the poor, fasting from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan (this means no food, water or sexual relations), and making the Hajj, the Pilgrimage to Mecca, once during one’s life. We can see here many similarities to elements in Christianity: the Apostles’ or Nicene Creed, the Liturgy of the Hours, tithing, and

Lenten observances. The pilgrimage to Mecca is a lot like Christian pilgrimages, and particularly resonate with our Franciscan notion of visiting holy sites (think of Francis and the Holy Land, or Bonaventure’s visit to Mount La Verna).

After the death of the Prophet, there was disagreement as to who should lead the Muslim community. Some felt leadership should be inherited. Muhammad had no sons, but he had adopted his son-in-law Ali, husband to Muhammad’s daughter Fatima, and father to Muhammad’s only grandsons. These Muslims were known as the Party of Ali (Shi’ia Ali). Others believed the leader should be chosen from among Muhammad’s companions or members of his tribe. This disagreement led to the split between the Sunnis (the majority, who follow the *sunna*, a long tradition of interpretation) and the Shi’ites. The Shi’ites themselves divided within the first few centuries. The majority of Shi’ites follow a line that died out with the twelfth hereditary leader. They are called Twelvers, and the majority of Twelvers live in Iran.

There is also a mystical stream of Islam called Sufism. Like Christian mystics, Sufis focus on the love of God, and seek union with God in this life. The spirit of Sufism resonates with Franciscan sensibilities: ecstatic love of God, seeing God in all creatures and circumstances, and singing. The Sufi teacher, Rumi, once said, “Music is the squeaking of the Door of Heaven.” A man in audience countered, “I do not like this squeaking.” Rumi replied, “That is because you hear it squeaking as the Door closes to you, but I hear it squeaking as it opens to me.” This reminds me of a Troubadour I know, who used to play stick fiddle. In fact, some scholars believe that the reason St. Francis was not killed immediately by the Muslim soldiers who captured him was because they thought he might have been a Sufi. Rumi even mentions Francis in his poetry. Unfortunately, most Western Christians have only a very superficial view of Islam, particularly since 9/11: Islamic terrorists, crowds of angry Arabs chanting anti-American slogans, and so forth. However, this is as much of a distortion of Islam as is the view that Catholicism is all about bombing abortion clinics and priests abusing children. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world, and, like Catholicism, one of the most ethnically diverse: not all Arabs are Muslim (there are many Arab Christians, Maronite and Chaldean Catholics among them), nor are most Muslims Arab. Muslims are African and Malaysian, Indian and Chinese. Many Western Cau-

casians are Muslim. I have been asked many times why Muslim leaders do not speak out against terrorism. The fact is, they do. Unfortunately, our media does not choose to give us those stories; they do not sell papers.

Francis saw the Crusades as short-sighted, and tried to reach out to the Sultan in friendship. He did not, of course, end up converting the Sultan to Christianity, which was his original intent, but he did convert the Sultan's heart by his sincere faith, and, in turn, was himself converted into a greater appreciation for Islam. Francis' followers can do no less.

I want to end with two stories, both taking place here in Austin, Texas. A couple of years ago, a local mosque was desecrated. Within a couple of hours, a multifaith candle vigil was held outside the mosque, with Jews, Christians and people of other faiths showing solidarity with the Muslim community. The second happened last year. Austin Interfaith Ministries holds a multi-faith Thanksgiving dinner every year, hosted by some particular group. A local church had agreed to let the dinner take place in their building. However, when they found out that Muslims (who did not have a large enough space to hold it themselves) were hosting, the church withdrew its agreement at the last minute. Immediately, a Jewish congregation volunteered to allow Muslims to host the event at their synagogue, and the response from the Austin community overwhelming. What a wonderful demonstration of true interfaith respect.