

WALKING**TOGETHER**SERIES

Catholics and Muslims

Friends or Adversaries?

Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

1. What are the origins of Islam?

Islam is a religion with nearly 1.2 billion followers. It owes its origin to Muhammad, a man born in the town of Mecca in Arabia around AD 570. Muhammad, a poor orphan gifted with good character, became a successful caravan manager. In 610, Muhammad began to have a series of visionary experiences during his times of prayer. An angelic voice communicated divine messages to him, which he shared with his wife and other relatives. A Christian relative of Muhammad felt these poetic messages may have come from God. However, many inhabitants of Mecca did not appreciate Muhammad's message. In 622, Muhammad left Mecca with a group of followers and relocated to Yathrib, which came to be known as Medina, the "City of the Prophet." The Muslim era begins with this year of the *Hijrah* (migration) to Medina.

In Medina, Muhammad continued to have revelatory experiences that seemed to guide him in his new role of leading an expanding community. Eventually, he and his followers defeated several enemy tribes and re-entered Mecca. In time, many of the tribes of Arabia joined him and became Muslims. The center of their faith was a firm belief in only one God, along with complete rejection of idol worship. In Mecca, the ancient shrine known as the Ka'bah had contained many animist idols, which Muhammad destroyed. The shrine remains the focal point of Muslim worship to this day.

Muhammad continued to lead his expanding community until his death from natural causes in 632. It is believed that Muhammad was illiterate; he reported his revelatory experiences orally to others who wrote them down. After his death, these written records, called the Qur'an, were compiled by his followers.

2. Did Muslims engage in conflict with Christian countries?

Soon after the death of Muhammad, his followers began to build upon their successes in the Arabian Peninsula

to plan a wider empire. By the time of Muhammad, the Byzantine and Persian Empires had drained their resources in warfare. Imagine the shock when the Arab armies crossed the ancient boundaries of the Roman Empire to conquer Syria, Egypt, Palestine, and Mesopotamia within a decade of Muhammad's death. These provinces had been among the first regions to embrace Christianity, and the population was overwhelmingly Christian at the time. Muslim armies continued their conquests across the Mediterranean lands that had inherited the legacy of the Roman Empire. Under Muslim rule, Jews and Christians were tolerated but were required to pay a special tax to support the Arab government.

3. What were the Crusades?

The Crusades were a form of religiously inspired offensive warfare waged by Christian knights against the Muslims during the Middle Ages, with the intention of regaining access to the Holy Land and assisting the Byzantine Empire. Much of southern Europe had endured invasion by Muslim forces for four centuries (AD 650 to 1050) before the Crusades (the First Crusade took place in 1094-1096). Catholics today regret the mixture of sacred and profane in these largely unsuccessful wars.

4. Why is there so much anger about colonialism?

In the nineteenth century, the decline of the Turkish (Ottoman) Empire made it possible for European states such as France, Britain, and Italy to colonize north Africa. Europe (and later the United States) had been fighting north African piracy and the enslavement of Europeans from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century; colonization was one way to gain control of an intractable geopolitical problem. However, Muslims saw it as a degrading defeat of their long-standing empire. Some methods used by colonial regimes harmed the traditional education system in Muslim lands.

5. Do Catholics and Muslims agree on any religious beliefs?

- We both worship one merciful and almighty God.
- We believe that God is creator of heaven and earth.
- We believe that God has spoken to humanity.
- We both await the Day of Judgment.
- We believe in the resurrection of the dead.
- We strive to live a morally upright life.
- We pray, give alms, and fast in our worship.

6. What are some examples of disagreements between our religious beliefs?

- Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet and future judge of the living and the dead, but not as the divine Son of God.
- Catholic Christians believe in One God in Three Divine Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—revealed to us in the Scriptures. Muslims reject the doctrine of the Trinity.
- Catholics believe that Jesus is true God and true man. Muslims reject the doctrine of God becoming incarnate.
- Catholics believe that Original Sin is transmitted to all human beings. Muslims believe that Adam and Eve sinned, but that they were forgiven and did not transmit their sin to their offspring.
- Catholics believe that the death of Jesus on the Cross redeemed us from sin. Muslims reject the redeeming death of Jesus.
- Catholics believe that the Bible (Old and New Testaments) is God's final revelation to humanity. Muslims believe that the Qur'an is God's final revelation.
- Catholics believe that divorce is not allowed by God's law; the Qur'an allows divorce.

7. How are Muslims and Catholics trying to overcome the disagreements of the past?

Since the late 1980s, the Catholic bishops in the United States have made strenuous efforts to establish

ongoing dialogues with Muslims in the United States. One of the most important results is that now more than two hundred Muslim and Catholic leaders know one another well and have detailed knowledge of how each other's community interprets its sacred texts and traditions. In addition, when a crisis occurs, there is now a firmly established network of relationships that provides support and appropriate action.

One hope of Muslim-Catholic dialogue is that Muslims will teach about Catholic Christianity with accurate knowledge of our faith and practices, and that Catholics will teach about Islam with correct information about Muslim beliefs and traditions. Thanks to the insights from dialogue with Muslims, Catholics should feel obliged to be more articulate about their own understanding of salvation, the Trinity, the Incarnation, and Holy Scripture.

8. Is it inevitable that religious differences will lead to conflicts?

The hopes, sorrows, and triumphs of humanity accompany us in interreligious dialogue as we seek to practice "living the truth in love" (Eph 4:15). In addressing the burning questions of our time, Catholics and Muslims are painfully aware that religions have been co-opted into motivating acts of violence through the centuries. Today, the voices of hope in every society acknowledge there is simply no alternative to dialogue among the religions. We have already seen what happens in the absence of dialogue: profanation of sacred symbols, threats of terror, nations torn apart by incessant warfare. Dialogue and religious freedom form the cure for all forms of violence that feed on religious differences.

9. How does our dialogue combat prejudice?

Throughout the dialogues, Catholics have been able to compare recent acts of bias against Muslims with Catholic experiences of discrimination in America. Given widespread misunderstandings about Islam, Catholic-Muslim relations stand as a bulwark of solidarity, particularly in areas such as moral values and basic human dignity. In 1998, Pope John Paul II reminded Muslim leaders in Nigeria that "both

Christianity and Islam stress the dignity of every human person as having been created by God for a special purpose. This leads us to uphold the value of human life at all its stages, and to give support to the family as the essential unit of society.”¹

10. How can we overcome religious misunderstandings between Catholics and Muslims?

Catholics are beginning to reach out to their Muslim neighbors much as they did a generation ago to their Protestant neighbors. As a growing immigrant community in the United States, Muslims contribute to the tapestry of American life. Parish-sponsored visits to a mosque, along with other kinds of intercultural encounters, can help build bridges between the two communities. Exchanges of gifts and greetings for holy days and seasons (e.g., Easter and Ramadan) can become routine for communities that have grown in mutual support. When a crisis arises, locally or globally, these bonds of friendship already forged can help sustain tranquility in neighborhoods and cities.

Respect for another’s religion and his or her dignity as a creature of the merciful Creator can be a basis for a friendship that overcomes fear and adversity. As descendants of a common spiritual father, Abraham (*Ibrahim*), Catholics and Muslims in America can witness to the one God (*Allah*) who calls all men and women to build a civilization of love.

It is good to recall the words of Pope Benedict XVI when he addressed Muslim representatives in Cologne in 2005: “Interreligious and intercultural dialogue. . . is in fact a vital necessity, on which in large measure our future depends.”²

NOTES

- 1 Pope John Paul II, Address at Meeting with Muslim Leaders (March 22, 1998), no. 2, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/travels/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_22031998_nigeria-muslim_en.html.
- 2 Pope Benedict XVI, Address at Meeting with Representatives of Some Muslim Communities (Twentieth World Youth Day, August 20, 2005), www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/august/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050820_meeting-muslims_en.html.

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The document *Catholics and Muslims: Friends or Adversaries?* is part of the Walking Together series and was developed as a resource by the Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). It was reviewed by the committee chairman, Bishop Richard J. Sklba, and has been authorized for publication by the undersigned.

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First Printing, September 2007

ISBN 978-1-60137-009-9

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Pub No. 7-009
USCCB Publishing
Washington, D.C.
ISBN 978-1-60137-009-9

ISBN 978-1-60137-009-9



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