

THE  
*Episcopal*  
CHURCH



## **Christian-Muslim Relations: Theological and Practical Guidance for Episcopalians**

Since 1979, General Convention has passed resolutions endorsing substantive dialogue between Episcopalians and Muslims on theological and humanitarian matters. During this same period, The Episcopal Church has encouraged and supported Christian-Muslim dialogues facilitated by the National and World Councils of Churches. Increasingly, Episcopalians are engaging with Muslims at the local level in a variety of settings. This guide provides theologically grounded tips and best practices for those new to such engagements.

1. **The authenticity of openheartedness.** These guidelines rest on the conviction that openheartedness toward (thus positive relationship with) Islam and Muslims accords with our Baptismal Covenant promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons and to strive for justice and peace among all people.
2. **The matter of names.** “Islam” is itself the Arabic word for “submission.” It is pronounced with the accent on the second syllable. Things mandated, influenced, or inspired by Islam may be termed “Islamic.” An adherent of this religion is a Muslim. (The term “Mohammedan”—while found in some literature—is not an appropriate synonym.) When used as an adjective, “Muslim” indicates something done by (or having to do with) a person who embraces “Islam”—the religion. In some publications, “Muslim” is rendered “Moslem.” In fact, a survey of English-language materials about Islam will reveal that many terms have more than one spelling. Why such variants? Arabic, the sacred language of Islam, uses an alphabet consisting of consonants only. Some have no direct equivalent in the Latin alphabet. The process of conversion of words from Arabic script to Latin letters allows for multiple spelling possibilities.
3. **Islam’s complexity.** Worldwide, one in every five persons identifies as Muslim. Consider, therefore, the following points:
  - a. “The Muslim World” is an oft used but seldom helpful construct. When used by non-Muslims, it implies a place/a group of people “out there” or “over there”—whereas, in almost every diocese of The Episcopal Church, Muslims have been a significant presence

for two generations or more. The binary “the Muslim World versus the West” is rarely accurate. Speaking of “Muslim-majority” countries or regions is often more appropriate.

- b. Through immigration and commerce, Muslims, in all their diversity, have introduced Islam to every locale in which The Episcopal Church is present.
  - c. Muslims, like Christians, are not monolithic in their attitudes, experiences, and priorities. Diversity among Muslims results from factors such as nationality, ethnicity, native language, geographic location, social status, gender, economic status, attitudes toward modernity, sectarian lines, preferred legal tradition, and attitudes toward global politics, among other factors. Broad generalizations about Islam and Muslims are, therefore, likely to be inaccurate.
  - d. While there are many commonalities, there are important distinctions between Sunni and Shi’a Islam. The two differ regarding Islam’s early history and the transfer of authority after the death of the Prophet, certain theological matters, certain worship practices, and the foundations of jurisprudence. Demographically, some 85% of all Muslims are Sunni. Some 10% are Shi’a. Some simply say, “We are Muslims,” and decline sectarian labels. Regarding African American Muslims, most are Sunni, a few are Shi’a, and some belong to movements such as the Nation of Islam.
4. **Basics.** Given the complexity of Islam, essentializing is to be avoided; but Episcopalians engaged in interreligious dialogue or projects need basic information on Islamic history, beliefs, and practices.<sup>1</sup> What follows is a brief primer on basic Islamic beliefs and practices about which Christians often have questions:
- a. **Naming God.** *Allah* is Arabic for “God.” It is the primary name of God for all Muslims. Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews also call God “Allah.” When speaking or writing in a language other than Arabic, many Muslims translate “Allah” to that language’s name for “God” in written and spoken discourse. In Islamic tradition, God has ninety-nine Names (attributes)—the most prominent of which are al-Rahman (the Compassionate) and al-Rahim (the Merciful).
  - b. **Qur’an.** The Qur’an (sometimes spelled “Koran”), is Islam’s holy book. Muslims believe it to be God’s speech, transmitted in Arabic through the Prophet Muhammad over a twenty-two-year period. In length it is similar to the New Testament. It contains 114 suras (chapters). Its first sura, the Fatiha (the Opener), which has seven verses, is the core element of Muslim ritual prayer.<sup>2</sup> The second sura has 286 verses. The remaining suras are progressively shorter (in most cases). Since it is not organized thematically, attempting to read the Qur’an from beginning to end is problematic as a first approach. Consider, instead, following a reading plan offered by a good textbook. For Muslims, translations of the Qur’an are considered “interpretations” rather than the authentic text. Therefore, when exploring it in English (or any other language), it is best to use at least two respected translations and to be careful to acknowledge that you are not working with the authentic text.<sup>3</sup> Be aware that, second in authority to the Qur’an is a large body

of literature known as the Hadith (report; tradition). These compendia of sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad are records of his Sunna (his example).

- c. **Muhammad.** Muhammad (570–632 CE) is recognized by Muslims as a prophet of God. He is also known as a messenger of God, because he was the conduit for a holy book. Since he is fully human, Muslims do not worship him; but they do revere, him. When mentioning him, it is customary to say, “Peace be upon him.”
- d. **Biblical figures in the Qur’an.** The Qur’an speaks of the stories of Adam, Abraham, Moses, Joseph, and a number of other biblical personalities—Jesus and Mary among them. Christians may be surprised to learn that Jesus and his mother are major figures in Islam. In fact, “Maryam” (Mary) is the name of the nineteenth sura of the Qur’an. The Qur’an calls Jesus “Messiah” and “Word of God,” but the meaning ascribed to these titles differs from Christian use.
- e. **Five Pillars of Islam.** Sunni Muslims speak of the Five Pillars of Islam—five basic practices that frame their life as Muslims:
  - i. **Shahadah:** The assertion of in God and in Muhammad as God’s messenger.
  - ii. **Salat:** A brief worship ritual performed five times daily at specific times, using a fixed text and a set pattern of prostration and other postures. Muslims may perform *salat* more than five times daily. *Salat* may be performed at home or in a *masjid* (place of prostration)—often called a *mosque*.
  - iii. **Fasting:** Abstention from food, drink, and sex from daybreak to sunset during the thirty days of the holy month of Ramadan.
  - iv. **Hajj:** Pilgrimage to Mecca. Muslims are to complete this at least once in their lifetime, provided they are healthy enough to travel and have the financial means to do so.
  - v. **Zakat:** The obligatory annual returning of 2.5% of one’s disposable wealth to the Muslim community for sustenance of the poor, maintenance of places of worship, and several other specific purposes.
- f. **Supplication and remembrance.** In addition to *salat*, Muslims may offer supplication (*dua*) in simple or elaborate forms; they may, as well, worship by chanting one or more of God’s Names—a practice called *dhikr* (pronounced *thikr* or *zikr*), the literal meaning of which is remembrance.
- g. **Holidays.** It is appropriate for Episcopalians to wish Muslim neighbors well on Islamic holidays. Islam employs a non-adjusting lunar calendar. Thus, in relation to the solar calendar, Islam’s months and holidays fall some eleven days earlier each year. A new day (hence a new month) begins at sundown. Depending on their sectarian or cultural identity, some Muslims celebrate holidays that are ignored by other Muslims. However, Muslims the world around observe two principal festivals. *Eid al-Fitr* (pronounced *eed*

*al-fitra*; the Festival of Fast-Breaking) marks the end of the month of Ramadan (a period of obligatory fasting during daylight hours). *Eid al-Adha* (pronounced *eed al-ahd-hah*; the Feast of Sacrifice) begins on the tenth day of the month in which Hajj (pilgrimage) is made to Mecca, about two-and-a-half months after *Eid al-Fitr*, and extends over four days. It is associated with Abraham's willingness to fulfill God's request to sacrifice his son. Since God substituted a ram for Abraham's son, Muslims who have the means are expected to sacrifice rams (or other unblemished male animals—goats, bulls, camels) on this holiday; or, they may purchase, or contribute toward the purchase of, an animal, which is slaughtered professionally. The meat becomes the centerpiece of the holiday meal shared with family and friends; it is also distributed to the poor worldwide, making this holiday a huge event of outreach and address of world-hunger issues.

- h. **Shari'ah.** Literally, *shari'ah* means the “broad path”—particularly, a path that leads to water. Although the word *shari'ah* is usually translated “Islamic law,” this is misleading. Different from European and American legal systems, *shari'ah* is God-given comprehensive guidance, touching on all aspects of life and reflecting Islam's proclamation of God's intimate concern for justice between human beings. Often, when mention is made of *shari'ah* or Islamic Law in non-Muslim sources, it would be more appropriate to have spoken of *fiqh* (jurisprudence). Many (but certainly not all) Sunni Muslims subscribe to one of the four authoritative “schools” of legal reasoning. Shi'a Muslims have their own. Typically, popular secular media speak of *shari'ah* as something negative only. Episcopalians can work with their Muslim neighbors to lift up examples of *shari'ah* as *ihsan*—the doing of the beautiful.
- i. **Halal.** Islamic legal reasoning (which is informed by the Qur'an, the Prophet's example, consensus, and analogy) defines what is *halal* (permissible), what is *haram* (prohibited), and what falls into several categories in between. Many Muslims strive to eat only foods that are halal or neutral. However, there is some diversity of understanding as to what falls into each category. Most would avoid alcohol and all pork products (including gelatin that are pork-based). Some believe that shellfish are also *haram*. Many will eat meat only if the animal has been slaughtered according to specific Islamic practice; some will accept Kosher meat; for others, “not pork” is a sufficient distinction. Awareness of Muslim dietary attitudes and practices can be helpful to Episcopalians engaged in interreligious collaboration. It is always appropriate to inquire about preferences.
- j. **Jihad.** The noun *jihad* means “struggle.” While it does sometimes refer to armed struggle on behalf of the faith, translating *jihad* as “holy war” is misleading. It comes from a linguistic root meaning “to endeavor, to strive, to labor.” Hence, it can name one's own effort to better one's relationship with God. (In this sense it could be translated as “spiritual discipline.”) It is also a popular given-name for Arab Christians and Muslims alike.
- k. **Hijab.** The root meaning of *hijab* refers to guarding one's modesty (which is expected of Muslim men and women alike). Most often, it refers to one's manner of dress. What constitutes “Islamic clothing” varies from place to place within the compass of The

Episcopal Church's reach. Some Muslims in Europe or the Americas dress according to a style that is traditional in the Middle East, northern Africa, or regions of Asia; others dress according to local norms. *Hijab* is often synonymous with "headscarf"—which some Muslim women never wear (except when praying). Among Muslim women who do wear a headscarf at all times when in public, some accompany it with a *niqab* (face covering). Avoid the assumption that Muslim women who wear a head-covering are oppressed in some way; in fact, some who choose to do so feel empowered by it. Whatever their practice in public, Muslim women cover their hair when in a mosque. Christian women who visit a mosque for any purpose should bring and wear a headscarf as a sign of respect to the host community.

5. **Dialogue and Collaboration.** Given the commitments made through our Baptismal Covenant, dialoguing theologically and making common cause with our Muslim neighbors are indeed acts of faithfulness. When engaging in dialogue and collaboration:
  - a. **Know your dialogue partners.** Are they lifelong Muslims or recent converts? Are they native-born or immigrants? If the former, are they African American or some other ethnicity? If the latter, are they first-generation or second? What cultural and political particularities from their homeland might come with them to the conversation? Again, keep in mind that Muslims (as do Christians) differ among themselves on a plethora of issues.
  - b. **Anticipate gender segregation.** When religious matters are on the agenda, Muslim dialogue partners will most likely be men. Gatherings organized by Muslims, especially those held in local mosques, often practice gender segregation in prayer areas and places of socializing, dining, and fellowship. When in dialogue, fellowship, or collaboration with Muslims, it is helpful to know that many of them prefer to avoid handshaking with people of a different gender. Some Muslims may disapprove of The Episcopal Church's stance on LGBTQ understandings or policies. Episcopalians in dialogue with Muslims need to be aware of the reality of that possibility.
  - c. **Be aware of the Islamic clock.** When planning events with members of the Muslim community, it is respectful to be aware of the times of Islamic daily prayer in one's locale and to accommodate them in the event schedule. Episcopalians might simply ask Muslim planning partners how they would prefer to do so.
  - d. **Be aware of the Islamic calendar.** When planning interfaith events, take note of the dates of the two *Eids* and avoid scheduling interfaith events on those days. Take note also of the dates for Ramadan. Most Muslims are particularly busy during that month and their day is very much focused around when the fast can be broken. If an interfaith event is planned during Ramadan, avoid a focus on food during the hours of fasting. Non-Muslims are not obligated to join in this practice. However, they can be considerate of those who are fasting. On every evening of Ramadan, *iftar* (fast-breaking) is a special time—and many Muslims are eager to include neighbors and friends in the feasting that follows. Episcopalians who are invited to an *iftar* might take a small gift of nuts, dried fruits, or sweets.

- e. **Label negative behavior appropriately.** When speaking and writing of blatant, virulent, aggressive, promotion of negativity about Islam and Muslims, consider avoiding the term “Islamophobia”—which, literally, means “fear of Islam.” Referring to “anti-Muslim bigotry” is often far more accurate. Whatever it is called, aggressive anti-Islamic or anti-Muslim rhetoric promotes attitudes and overt behavior contrary to Episcopal Baptismal Covenant promises to strive for justice and peace among all people, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself.

**6. Making common cause.** While our understandings of salvation history differ considerably, Episcopalians and Muslims can participate collaboratively in God’s mission in three traditional ways: mitigating human need, challenging structural injustice, and caring for creation. The Islamic principle of *ihsan* (doing the beautiful; defined by tradition as behaving as though one can see God because, without doubt, one is *seen by* God) offers a basis on which Christians may join with Muslims in loving service to God, ecological stewardship, and concerted effort toward the public good.

**7. Resources for deepening understanding.** This collection of guideposts is a starting-point. Recommendations of print and AV resources about Islam or Christian-Muslim engagement are available from the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations. For resources for dialogical close reading of scripture (Bible and Qur’an) and other theological texts, see the archives of the Building Bridges Seminar.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Among the many fine sources for such information, see Amir Hussain, *Oil & Water: Two Faiths, One God* (Kelowna, BC: CopperHouse, 2006), which provides a Muslim scholar’s concise introduction to Islam and Christian-Muslim understanding. For an in-depth introduction to Islam, see Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> *Fatiha* is pronounced with stress on the first and third syllables.

<sup>3</sup> The translation by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) and *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017)—prepared by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and a team of translators—are highly regarded.

<sup>4</sup> The Building Bridges Seminar is an ongoing dialogue of Christian and Muslim scholar-believers, founded by the Archbishop of Canterbury in January 2002, under stewardship of Georgetown University since July 2012. [New URL pending]