# Howling at the (Crescent) Moon: Islam

**Icebreaker-** This week we’re going to look at a religion that’s been making a lot of headlines lately: Islam. Before we do that, however, I want to find out how much you already know. The news purports to make us experts on Islam, but who do we believe? Is it really a religion of peace? Or are the machine gun toting, bomb-planting radicals the true heart of Islam? *Pick someone who seems uninterested and ask them to pick a number between two and five.* Break into groups of <<insert selected number>>. Put your names at the top and then write down everything you know, or think you know, about Islam. No smart phones, no books, no Google; just what you already know. We’ll take about five minutes to do this.

*Collect the sheets, put up slide one of Islam power point.*

Alright… let’s talk Islam.

Most of you probably recognize the symbol on the screen. This is the Islamic crescent. It is a symbol of the Islamic faith just like the cross is a symbol of ours. Its precise origins are not agreed upon, but it has been in widespread popular use since the 19th century (it was the symbol of the Ottoman Turk Empire). Similar symbols have been found in ruins dating back to the 1st century AD, so the symbol itself predates Islam. Interestingly, so does Allah. Wait… what? **(Slide 2)** The name Allah was originally a title, not a name. Exodus 16:1 tells us that during their wanderings the Hebrews came to a place called ‘The Wilderness of Sin. They also had a rather famous encounter at the foot of Mount Sinai. Both of those places get their name from Sin al-Ilah, the Sumerian moon god. The title ‘al-Ilah’ literally means ‘the deity’ or ‘the god’. It isn’t tough to see the connection between ‘al-Ilah’ and Allah. So Allah, the god of Islam, is really just a god from an ancient pagan culture repackaged and rebranded. To paraphrase King Solomon, there truly is nothing new under the sun… or the moon.

With that legacy in mind, on with the show... From the outset, we need to dispel one myth: The word ‘Islam’ does *not* mean peace. That’s shoddy scholarship. Islam means ‘submission’, and Muslim means ‘one who submits’. The Islamic faith’s origins can be traced to about 612 AD and to this guy, **(Slide 3)** a man whose name most of us already know: Mohammed, the chief prophet of Islam and really the center of their faith. Much like European depictions of Jesus, odds are pretty good this is not really what he looked like but cameras were in short supply in 7th century Arabia. It’s worth noting that Islam explicitly forbids drawings of their prophet. You’ll never see a picture of Mohammed in a mosque. In fact any faithful Muslim you talk to will tell you that this is Ali, the prophet’s cousin. The artist who painted it would disagree, however.

Because his is absolutely central to the Muslim faith, I think it would be wise to begin with a short biography of Mohammed. He was born in 582AD to a poor family in Mecca, which is in what we now call Saudi Arabia. Despite his humble beginnings, he grew up to become was a merchant, and it was his connections as a merchant that exposed him to the teachings of numerous religions, including both Christianity and Judaism. He encountered orthodox and heretical sects of both, as well as dozens of pagan traditions. In the days of Mohammed’s youth Mecca was a center for pagan worship, including the worship of Sin al-Ilah, centered on a black, approximately square structure called the Kaaba **(Slide 4)**, which still exists today though it is no longer used for pagan rites. A reasonable argument can be made that Mohammed’s family worshipped this particular god and that Mohammed’s goal was to purge Mecca of all religious influences other than Sin al-Ilah. The primary evidence for this is Mohammed’s own family tree – his father’s name was Abd Allah, which means ‘Servant of al-Ilah’. Mohammed had a habit of retreating from civilization for days at a time to caves near his home and this ultimately led to the turning point of his life in 610AD. The story goes that as he was meditating in solitude inside a cave known as ‘The Cave of Hira’ he was confronted by the angel Gabriel **(Slide 5)**. I have no doubt he was visited by something that looked like an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14), but it probably wasn’t really the archangel.

Mohammed reported that he was overwhelmed by the sight of the angelic being, which is understandable. The Bible has similar accounts of men and women who reacted in fear when confronted by one or more angels. Gabriel, or whoever he was, the visitor ordered him to recite. Whatever it was in the cave insisted that Mohammed to continue reciting for so long that eventually he was seized by spiritual powers and felt compelled to continue his recitation. This, I presume, is an attempt at the Biblical concept of men being inspired by the Holy Spirit to write the books of the Bible. What matters, however, is that this is the origin of the Qur’an. The word Qur’an, in fact, means ‘recitation’. Following this visitation, Mohammed had an idea that was probably one of the wisest of his life: He was convinced that the visitor had been an evil spirit and that his recitation was done under compulsion brought on by demonic possession. Unfortunately, at the urging of his wife, Khadija bint Khuwaylid, he ran with it instead, allowing the visitations to continue. Thus began his career as the prophet of Islam.

((A brief side note because you may have heard a thing or two about Mohammed and his harem: Yes he had least thirteen wives, and possibly as many as sixteen, plus various other concubines (women captured as spoils of war). Histories and opinions vary, but by most counts he never had more than twelve wives at any one time. It is absolutely certain that at the time of his visions he had only one wife. He did not become a polygamist until after she died in 620AD. All of his wives were widows of friends killed in battle or divorced women who had been sent away by their husbands for one reason or another. There is one exception to this, and she is the single most sordid part of Mohammed’s history. In 620AD, he married Aisha bint Abu Bakr, the daughter of his closest friend. She was six when she married Mohammed (who was 38 at the time). Now that that gross detail is out of the way…))

The years that followed were a cycle of persecution, retribution, and revelation. This continued for more than a decade until 621AD when he experienced what may be the most famous of his encounters with ‘Gabriel’. This was Mohammed’s ‘night vision’ that involved the supposed angel taking him on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and into Heaven on the back of a magical winged steed. They landed in Jerusalem where the Dome of the Rock now sits, which is why Muslims claim it as their second holiest site, with only Mecca holding greater significance. Perhaps now you can see why they so vigorously fight against Israel, and why the idea of the Temple Mount being under Jewish control bothers them so much. More on this in a few minutes.

Mohammed began preaching the things he had been told, but his new religion was not well received by the people of Mecca. He and his few followers fled to nearby Medina in 622 **(Slide 6)**. This event, in Arabic, is called the Hijrah. Though Muslims call it a pilgrimage or journey, it was a hastily arranged trip that included being chased by angry citizens of Mecca. Regardless, the Hijrah is so important to Muslims that they use it to mark the beginning of their calendar, much like the Christian world marks ours with the birth of Christ (That is, the year zero AD: Anno Domini, or the Year of our Lord). In Medina, Mohammed gathered a small army of followers and marched on Mecca, conquering it with little opposition toward the end of the year 629AD. He cleansed the Kaaba of pagan influences, dedicating it instead to Allah.

Mohammed died in 632AD. His death set off a struggle for succession, the effects of which are still felt today. This conflict split Islam into the two main factions that are familiar to all of us today: The Sunnis and the Shias (or Shiites). We’ll talk a bit more about that in a minute. The legacy of Mohammed is a major religion that today boasts about 1.2 billion members all over the world, although the largest concentrations of them are, of course, found in the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia.

Islam has three holy books. The first and most prominent we are all familiar with. It is the Qur’an **(Slide 7)**. When one reads the Qur’an, Islam’s holy book, they are faced with a challenge. The book lacks clear chronology, with surrahs (roughly equivalent to chapters) written at different stages of Mohammed’s life jumbled together. There are 114 of them in all, recorded over a span of 22 years and arranged (approximately) in decreasing order of length. The book contains no narrative as we would find in Genesis or other books of the Bible. It is said to be a copy of an original work found in Heaven. The book was originally given in Arabic and to the Muslim that is its only true form. If you find a copy of the Qur’an in English (or any other language) the cover will make it very clear that it is not actually the Qur’an, but an approximation meant to convey the message of the Qur’an. Only a copy in Arabic is considered to be a true Qur’an. No translation, supposedly, can reveal its true perfection. It is interesting that Muslims who know almost no Arabic will frequently memorize the entire Qur’an, roughly the same length as the New Testament, in its native language.

Physically, the Qur’an is treated with enormous respect. Usually, a Muslim will never hold the Qur’an below his waist. When it is put away after use it will be placed on the highest shelf in the home and carefully wrapped in fine linen or another elegant cloth. Hopefully this gives some insight into the reason that Muslims react so forcefully when there is so much as an accusation or suspicion that a physical copy of the Qur’an has been abused or mistreated in any way. It is far more than just a book to them. A quick study of history will show that even unproven allegations can result in rioting, depending upon who has been accused of the offense. The Qur’an is perfect and uncorrupted, according to Islam, unlike the Bible which they consider to be a faulty document. It is interesting that, like the Mormons, Muslims like to appeal to the Bible as a basis for their legitimacy. It is a precedent to them because it talks about the prophets that came before Mohammed. Yet without pausing to draw a breath they will say that the Bible is not really trustworthy or that it has been corrupted and is full of errors. This is something of a doctrinal pickle for Muslims: It’s difficult to have it both ways. Logic notwithstanding, however, this is the official Muslim position.

The Qur’an contains many references to Biblical characters and events, but these are often twisted events that have been modified to fit the Islamic narrative For example, the Qur’an contains the details of the patriarch Abraham being ordered to sacrifice his son but it is not Isaac he is told to sacrifice… it is Ishmael. This is a fascinating study, and one I’d love to walk through with any of you another time if you are interested. We don’t have time to get into it tonight, unfortunately.

As I said a bit ago, there are three holy books in all. Though the Qur’an is the most prominent, there are two others drawn collectively from a body of teachings known as the Sunna **(Slide 8)**, a word which means ‘path’. The Sunna contains the Hadith, which means ‘narrative, a commentary on the acts of Mohammed as recorded by his companions and the Sira, which are traditional biographies of Mohammed. If you want to know the teachings of Islam, you must look to all three books. You should also know that in its pure form Islam is the most direct counter to Christianity from amongst the groups we have studied and will study next week. Many of their doctrines are the polar opposite of Christian and Judaic belief. If you believe, as I do, that Islam was demonically inspired then this comes as no surprise to you.

**(Slide 9)** The majority of Muslims affirm six beliefs. Foremost among these is belief in Allah **(Slide 10)**. Allah is the generic Arabic word for ‘god’, but of course in Islam it has a very specific and special meaning. You can equate this to the difference between the uses of the word ‘god’ with a lower case versus upper case letter ‘g’ in our English Bibles. Allah is always singular. He is only one person, never plural. He is a divine being with no counterparts. He also has no children, which Muslims will state quite emphatically. This is a direct reaction, of course, to our claims about Jesus. Their position is actually quite similar to the heresy of Arianism which has its modern counterpart with the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The name ‘father’ is never used in Islam to describe Allah. To a Muslim, this term is suggestive only of paternity so it would be blasphemous to call Allah ‘father’. Again Christianity holds a diametrically oppose view. To us, God is not just our father; He is Abba, literally ‘daddy’. It is an affectionate, familiar, and loving term.

I said a minute ago that the Qur’an misrepresents many Biblical concepts. Another that they mangle horribly is the Trinity. Not that they even bat an eyelash at believing in the Trinity, mind you, but in that they misrepresent our view by teaching that the Christian Trinity is not one God but three separate gods consisting of God the Father, Jesus, and Mary. A similar gem can be found in one other religion we have studied: Mormonism. Although they don’t teach the idea of Mary as part of the Godhead (they deny the Trinity completely), if you will recall the lesson from week three they do teach that Jesus was the result of God the Father having sex with Mary. This can be something of a sticking point when witnessing to Muslims. Remember that the Qur’an is perfect to them, and yet it misrepresents what you and I believe. You can’t point that fact out to them without calling the Qur’an flawed, and calling the Qur’an flawed will shut down a discussion instantly. This can be a difficult hurdle to overcome. In short, it is likely there is nothing you can show them from the Bible that will convince them. They see references to Jesus being the only begotten son of God in a carnal sense. They see references to the Holy Spirit as an expression of the will of God, not as a personage. The tale of Ananias as Sephira that works so well as a counter to the Jehovah’s Witnesses is of no use against the arguments of Muslims. The only way you will ever have success in this is to give them a very detailed history lesson about the core of the Qur’an and the heretical sects Mohammed came into contact with that gave him the false impression that Mary was considered a goddess by orthodox Christianity. It is more detail than I have time to get into tonight, but again if you want to study it later I will be happy to help you do so. I will always encourage you to be as well armed as you can. Consider such historical knowledge one more arrow in your quiver.

Time to shift gears without using the clutch: Quite possibly the worst sin in all of Islam is Shirk, which literally means ‘associating’. It is the act of associating Allah with anything lesser or implying that there is anything greater. As I said before, Islam teaches that Allah has no counterpart. In the Qur’an he is not begotten and does not beget. He has no equals, no children, no wife, and no partners at all. This leads us to Tawheed, which is the Muslim concept of the absolute oneness of not only Allah, but also of his will. You must understand that in Islam not only is Allah absolute and one, everything is to be under the control of – in subjection to – Allah. Everyone, everywhere, everything, always: That is the ideal toward which Muslims are working.

The second great belief of Islam is a belief in the prophets. First and foremost among them, of course, being Mohammed. Typically, when you see Mohammed’s name written in English, it will be followed by the initials P.B.U.H, or the phrase ‘peace be upon him’. Any time his name is given, even when spoken aloud, this expression of respect will follow it immediately. Mohammed is said to be the greatest man who ever lived, which if you assume that he wrote the Qur’an in his spare time rather than under direction from an actual angel is not really a surprise. History is replete with examples of his pride, arrogance, and ego. You can’t tell that to a Muslim, however. Such absolute devotion to another man is a tough concept for us as Christians to understand. We consider Jesus in such terms, but then to us he was God as well as a man. If you have seen the occasionally trendy little armbands with the initials W.W.J.D. – What Would Jesus Do – inscribed on them, this should give you an inkling of how Muslims feel about their great prophet. Except for them the letters are W.W.M.D. – What Would Mohammed Do. To a devout Muslim it is of ultimate importance, from the moment your eyes open in the morning to when they close at night, to consider and emulate in word and deed the example of Mohammed to a degree that you would find fascinating and perhaps astonishing. To them, Mohammed’s way is the way in which we should live because, in the end, it’s all about Mohammed. Indeed, to the casual observer who knows nothing else about Islam other than what he can observe in their daily lives it might seem as though the worship Mohammed and not Allah.

If you will permit me the distraction, I think it is important for us to compare this reverence for Mohammed as a prophet to their thoughts on Jesus. Despite gross theological errors about who He really was, Muslims do hold great respect for Jesus, whom they list as a major prophets – one of 124,000 prophets to walk the Earth since Adam. They believe that he was born of a virgin – sort of – their definition of the term ‘virgin’ means that Jesus had no *human* father. If you will recall what I said about their notion of our Trinity then you can see how this flows naturally from that idea. They believe he was a very great teacher, a man of righteousness, and a worker of miracles. They DENY outright that he was God or that he was crucified, but they do believe he ascended into Heaven and that he will come again. The Qur’an’s view of Jesus is confusing and doesn’t agree with the Bible on a lot of important points, but if you can understand how they view Jesus it does give you some traction in witnessing to them about who Jesus really is.

**(Slide 11)** The third principal belief of Muslims is in angels. It is taught that each person has two angels assigned to him: One to record his good deeds and one to record his bad deeds. If you have ever seen this picture **(Kronk)** it’s kind of like that, without the humor. They also believe in demons, and in a class of beings called ‘Jinn’. This is where we get our English word ‘genie’. They are spirit beings that were made from fire. In approximation, Jinn serve the same role in Islamic theology as Archangels serve in Christian theology.

The fourth key belief is in the Holy Books. This includes, as we discussed at length, the Qur’an. But they also have a degree of respect for the Torrah, which we know as the first five books of the Old Testament, the Psalms, and the Gospels. They claim, however, that all of these have been abrogated. Abrogation is a key term in Islam. It means that the Biblical text has been superseded. That it was for the time in which it was written but that it no longer applies now that the Qur’an, the perfect book, has come. These other books are, therefore, of limited value and should not be relied upon.

Fifth, Muslims affirm a belief in the Day of Judgment and the resurrection. On that day each person’s deeds (as recorded by their angelic scribes) will be weighed in the balance. Those whose good deeds outweigh their bad deeds will be rewarded with paradise. Those whose bad deeds outweigh their good deeds will be judged to Hell. No one can know in advance what Allah will do. There is absolutely no assurance of salvation in Islam except for those who give their lives in righteous jihad. We’ll talk more about jihad in a moment. The sixth and final core belief of all Muslims really needs no elaboration, but you should know that they affirm a belief in fate; in destiny.

**(Slide 12)** In addition to these six beliefs there are five ‘pillars’ in Islam. These are not beliefs – they are obligations all Muslims must observe. The first of these is the profession of faith or in Arabic the Shahadah. “There is no god but Allah, and Mohamed is his prophet.” A single, honest recitation of these words in Arabic is all that it takes for a person to become a Muslim. You can see the Shahadah written on the flag of Saudi Arabia. Now you know that what looks like a nonsensical scrawl to western eyes is actually something far more dangerous.

The second pillar is prayers, salat, which are performed five times daily. These are done no matter where the Muslim may be, at dawn, noon, in the afternoon, at sunset, and at nightfall. When praying, Muslims always face Mecca. An earlier revelation told Mohammed that he was to face Jerusalem when praying but after an unfortunate incident with some Jews and a bit of spilled blood Allah apparently changed his mind and so now they face Mecca instead. Prayers are preceded by ritual washings – ablutions. In addition to the five daily prayers, Muslims gather for congregational prayers at a mosque on Fridays. If you’ve ever heard this, it is the Muslim call to prayer **(Sound Clip)**. These are obligatory to all Muslim men.

**(Slide 13)** The third pillar is alms giving – giving money to the poor. In Arabic the word for this is ‘Zakat’. Generally this is equal to 2.5 percent of the individual’s wealth. The fourth pillar is fasting, Sawn, specifically during the month of Ramadan. This is a fast not only from food, but also from drinking, smoking, and sexual intercourse from sunrise to sunset. Indeed, it is a mark I hold in admiration of Muslims who refuse, even in Middle Eastern countries with daytime temperatures approaching 140 degrees, to take even a drop of liquid during the day.

The fifth and final pillar is the pilgrimage – the Hajj. Every Muslim who is able is expected at least once in their lifetime to go to Mecca and take part in the rituals that occur there. It really is a spectacular event. Millions of people descend on Mecca for the Hajj from all over the world, and yet when you look at pictures of the Hajj you will note that everyone is required to take off his national dress and put on a very basic white costume that erases every trace of national identity, race, class, and anything else that would normally distinguish one individual from another. Unsurprisingly this creates a tremendous sense of brotherhood among Muslims who participate in the Hajj. For most, it is the highlight of their lives.

**(Slide 14)** What else does Islam teach? As I mentioned before they do have a belief in salvation (and its opposite if you’re naughty), but they do not believe in original sin. They do believe that Adam sinned against Allah, but that act did not pass any sin nature down to you and me. Once again, Islam stands in direct opposition to the teachings of the Bible. In this case it opposes a teaching from Genesis, which is part of the Torrah and therefore at least in some way respected by Muslims. But the Qur’an has come. How fortunate for us that god apparently changed his mind on that whole curse thing. That was a close call. Instead, the Qur’an teaches that man is frail and weak. We are prone to temptation and forgetfulness, but not predisposed to sin. The solution is obedience to Allah, and continual repentance. Combine this with what we learned a minute ago about angels recording the deeds of man to later weigh in the balance on the Day of Judgment and you can clearly see that Islam is a religion of works based salvation in its purest form. Once again, it is the polar opposite of Christianity.

Islam has produced vast, extensive lists of rules that would make a Pharisee blink. Muslims are expected to observe every last one of them is studious detail and repent when they do not. A great many of these rules are based on the life of Mohammed as recorded in the Hadith and the Sira. Again, there is absolutely no assurance of salvation possible in Islam, apart from dying in righteous jihad. A quick point of clarification before we move on: There are two kinds of jihad. The greater jihad is the struggle within oneself to live a righteous life, and the lesser jihad which is basically holy war in defense of Islam. Given that the greater jihad is rarely lethal, this assurance of salvation is tied to the lesser jihad. I say this so that you understand that when Muslims say ‘jihad’ it is not always a reference to terrorism, as we would term it.

**(Slide 15)** Because I know someone is going to ask, yes there are Surrahs in the Qur’an that can be interpreted to justify the violence practiced by certain groups. The same Surrahs, however, are used by more mainstream Muslims to say that the Qur’an explicitly forbids terrorism. In short, if Muslims can’t even say definitively what their religion teaches on the matter, CNN certainly can’t. Here are a couple examples. Surrah 5:32 reads, “Because of that {Israel’s sin in the wilderness}, We decreed upon the Children of Israel that whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption [done] in the land - it is as if he had slain mankind entirely. And whoever saves one - it is as if he had saved mankind entirely. And our messengers had certainly come to them with clear proofs. Then indeed many of them, [even] after that, throughout the land, were transgressors.” Moderates say this forbids murder except as punishment for murder or as self-defense; very similar to our western concept. Radicals read “corruption done in the land” as the presence of governance other than Islamic law in a given location. They also use the principle of ‘a soul for a soul’ to justify the cycle of retaliation. It doesn’t matter who started it.

Here’s another from the Quran. Surah 8:12 says, “[Remember] when your Lord inspired to the angels, "I am with you, so strengthen those who have believed. I will cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieved, so strike [them] upon the necks and strike from them every fingertip.” The moderate says this is Allah is directing the angels to fight at his command against non-believers. Radicals take this a step farther by volunteering to fight alongside the angels, so to speak. That is why it is a holy war to them. They’re just being helpful, in their minds. Twisted stuff, if you ask me.

Regardless of interpretation we can see that in Islam, as with most religions including Christianity, there is disagreement within the ranks over what their holy books teach. The key difference being that in most other religions those differences don’t lead to questions as fundamental as ‘Does the Qur’an give a Muslim permission to kill his neighbor for being Jewish?’

Yet there are other Surrahs that seem to preach peace. Qur’an (8:61): “But if the enemy inclines towards peace, do thou (also) incline towards peace, and trust in God: for He is One that hears and knows (all things).” This is the same Surrah that just told us to lop off fingers and heads. The question, then, is why do certain groups teach this way? What would drive a person to interpret the sentiment of Surrah 8 as warlike while apparently ignoring the apparent call for peace a few verses later? The answer is in a term you may have heard before: Islamism. **(Slide 16)** This is political Islam. It is a viewpoint held by roughly twenty percent of the world’s Muslim population and draws its roots from the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is fairly easy to observe that there is a lot of resentment among Muslims, mostly directed at the west, and if you take an honest look at the last couple hundred years of history it isn’t really hard to see why.

From Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt (1798) through the end of World War One (1918), nearly every majority Muslim nation in the world (Turkey being the one notable exception) came under the domination of European powers. This was deeply humiliating to the Muslims and in many ways a catalyst for Islamism. The key belief of Islamism is that Islam must have political power and state control in order to be correctly implemented. Their aim is Tawheed – total Islamic domination of everything and everyone everywhere – and the vast majority of them support a gradual social and political shift in that direction. But we also have the jihadists. Jihadists believe that only through violence can the perfect Islamic state be born. Most importantly, they believe that not only is democracy wrong, it is in direction contradiction to Tawheed. Can you see why these yahoos fought against our efforts to install a democratic government in Iraq? Can you see why ISIS is fighting to extinguish the nascent spark of democracy left behind in the wake of the US withdrawal from that country? In this belief system anyone who supports democracy – even other Muslims – immediately becomes an infidel and thus marked for death. They have no qualms about killing other Muslims who appear to be supportive of democracy. This is the true face of radical Islam. It is not a simple matter of Sunni versus Shiite as we are told on the news. The truth is far more complex than ancient political divisions.

Second, Jihadists recognize only one form of Islamic law: Sharia. They boldly state that any Muslim who does not follow their strict interpretation of Islamic law is not only a sinner, but a non-believer, effectively a non-Muslim. This brings me to their last belief. Jihadists have vowed eternal violence against all non-Muslims, as they define them. Until such time as the whole world is ruled by their version of Islamic law, areas not under Sharia are ‘Dar al-Harb’ (the House of War). Areas ruled by Sharia are ‘Dar al-Islam’ (the House of Islam). This strict interpretation of Islamic law is where the Burqa, and repression of women in general, comes from. Their interpretation of the Qur’an is the cause of suicide bombings and was used by the jerks that flew airplanes into the Twin Towers. These are the guys who chop off hands for stealing and stone (as adulteresses) women who have been raped. They do not recognize political boundaries. They are stateless because their law is Sharia, not the law of the country in which they happen to reside.

**(Slide 17)** What about the slightly more normal side of Islam… the other 80%? Islam has generated many, many sects. In fact by one count there are more sects of Islam than there are denominations of Christianity. Regardless, there are three major sects that we are going to concern ourselves with tonight: Sunni Islam, Shiite Islam, and Sufism. This is where the division following the death of Mohammed comes back to play. Following the prophet’s demise, the Sunni favored electing a successor to the prophet. They prevailed. The Sunni are consensus driven, and focus on the Sunna (Hadith and Sira) as the guiding documents for Islam. Worldwide, the Sunni are by far the majority of Muslims. There are almost a billion of them worldwide out of a total Muslim population of 1.2-1.4 billion people.

The next most populous group is the Shia or Shiites. By their way of thinking, a blood relative of Mohammed should be his successor. Ultimately they lost in that regard, but they still hold sway over many millions of Muslims, particularly in Iran and neighboring countries. The Shia are very much authority driven, eschewing consensus in favor of absolute control as seen in the Ayatollahs of Iran. It should come as no surprise that they value the teachings of the Qur’an over the Sunna.

**(Slide 18)** The third group, the Sufi, is the mystical side of Islam. They number about 240 Million worldwide. If you’ve ever seen a picture of a man wearing a fez, a semi-conical cap that usually has a tassel on the top, and flowing garments that spread out around them when they move about in a twirling fashion then you have seen Sufis. These men are the whirling dervishes, and they are probably the most visible face of Sufi Islam. They maintain that their teachers can trace an unbroken genealogy back to Caliph Ali, the fourth successor to Mohammed, and their focus is on attaining perfect worship of Allah through mysticism. This is an obscure concept in Islam but can be found in the Hadith in several places. Unlike other Muslims, Sufi believe that god (Allah) wants to be known by his followers. It is the only major sect of Islam that makes Allah relatable instead of distant and unapproachable.

**(Slide 19)** There are other, smaller groups as well such as folk Islam, which is not so much a unified philosophy as it is Islamic precepts mixed with local traditions such as shamanism, spiritism, and other local traditions. It is very common in the developing world, and especially in Africa. Another small offshoot is the Baha’i World Faith, about 5 million strong. As Muslims go, these guys are the hippies. They teach the same strict unity of god (Allah) found in larger branches, but they also believe in a unity of religion – that all religions are equally valid, come from the same place, and lead to the same end. They also preach one concept enshrines as sacred to all Americans courtesy of the Declaration of Independence: That all men are created equal. The last one I will mention is a curious creature that you have likely heard of before. The Nation of Islam is the only offshoot of Islam that is native to the United States. It started in 1930 under the leadership of a man named Wallace Fard. I’m only giving you his name because it’s fun to say. The Nation of Islam is really Islamic in name only. Once you dig very far beneath the surface it is actually a bizarre polytheistic religion that bears almost no resemblance to other forms of Islam.

**(Slide 20)** Okay. So Islam is violent at times, has a founder with a rather sordid past, is noted for oppressing women, and demands total subservience without any guarantee of salvation. So what in the heck is the appeal of Islam? I’m glad you asked. There are four things that readily present themselves.

1. It is, at least on the surface, a simple religion. As we said earlier all you really need to believe is contained in the Shahadah: That there is no god by Allah and Mohammed is his prophet. The other very basic beliefs are things many people already believe in anyhow; fate and angels, for example. As we said, it contains mountains of rules, but that is not necessarily apparent from the outside looking in.
2. There is an apparent moral clarity to Islam. The western world is moving farther and farther away from the Biblical example and the witness of Christ. I do not want to spark a controversy here by there was a Supreme Court decision handed down on June 26th of this year that illustrates that point perfectly. The point is our morals as a country are often muddled. Islam, on the other hand, is crystal clear, if extremely conservative at times. Many people are willing to overlook the fact that some Imams teach that it is a Muslim’s sacred duty to execute gays and force young girls into arranged marriages simply because the religion has clear morals and beliefs… even if they would be considered abominable beliefs by rational western thinking. You and I see that as ridiculous because we heed the voice of the Holy Spirit. People living without the Spirit do not have that benefit and so Islam may seem appealing to them.
3. Islam is complete. It encompasses every aspect of life and (thanks to its voluminous rule books) has an answer for how a person ought to live in virtually every imaginable circumstance. This also adds apparent simplicity. You will find similarities between Muslims in China and Muslims in Algeria, at least in terms of daily life, simply because of how thoroughly their faith governs every aspect of their lives.
4. Finally, Islam provides a sense of unity. Despite vast differences in ideology and, in some extreme cases, a knack for murder there is incredible unity and brotherhood to be found when Muslims of all stripes set aside nationality and every other mark of their differences to take the Hajj together. This is very attractive to people who often seen the Christian Church and other faith groups as divisive. Ever hear Christians accused of being right wing bigots bent of tearing this country apart? Yeah. I have too. Every day on CNN. You don’t hear that about Muslims, do you?

**(Slide 21)** So what does the Bible say, and how can we use it to combat the rising tide of Islam and, worse, Islamism?

1. God is triune, not singular.
2. God is approachable, and knowable – the opposite of Allah
   1. Islam: Master to slave relationship
   2. Christianity: Father to child relationship
3. God saves by grace through Faith
   1. Islam: “Allah loves not the prodigals and those who do wrong.”
      1. A religion of works, not faith.
   2. Christianity: Romans 5:8 and 1 John 4:10
      1. A message of hope that Muslims need to hear.

Understand the differences, especially now in a world that is forever attempting to draw parallels between Islam and Christianity when in fact none worth mentioning exist. Your book contains some key points on how to approach witnessing to a Muslim. Honestly, you will have more trouble witnessing to Muslims than any other group and this is because, as we state earlier, Islam is not a twisted form of belief that can be approached first from common ground before lovingly addressing differences. There is almost no common ground between Christianity and Islam. On most major doctrinal points they stand as stark opposites to one another.

**(Slide 22)** How to approach a Muslim:

1. Be knowledgeable about both Islam and Christianity, especially in terms of history.
2. Draw them out by asking questions and letting them talk.
3. Emphasize that Christianity is about a relationship with God.
4. Be culturally sensitive.
5. Appreciate the high cost of leaving Islam – This is huge.
6. Bear in mind that to a Muslim, it’s all about Mohammed, W.W.M.D.?

Homework for next week:

We talked briefly about how Islam impacts every area of a person’s life. Pick one of the following, research it on your own, and write a one page (or more if you feel like it) summary of what you learned.

1. Islamic taboos regarding food
2. Islamic clothing (women’s, men’s, or both)
3. Islamic traditions: Marriage
4. Islam at Home: Roles of Men and Women
5. Death to America! Why does Iran hate the west?