

**Understanding Islam:**  
**A Guide for Catholic Educators**

Document of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops'  
Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs  
In conjunction with the 2013 Mid-Atlantic Catholic-Muslim Dialogue.

*This document was produced by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs in conjunction with the 2013 Mid-Atlantic Muslim-Catholic Dialogue. It is the fruit of many years of collaborative effort by Catholic and Muslim scholars of the USCCB's Mid-Atlantic Catholic-Muslim dialogue. It is primarily intended to serve as a basic introduction for Catholic educators who are tasked with teaching the rudiments of Islam to students at the secondary school level, as well as parish leaders responsible for general adult religious education programs—a first-look, if you will, at Islam for students. The Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the USCCB is most grateful to all of the dialogue members for their tireless efforts to bring this document to fruition, and most especially to Dr. Sandra Keating, the principal author. After consulting this document, we would encourage readers to consider Dr. Keating's more advanced essay "What Catholics Should Know About Islam" which includes for those who wish to deepen their understanding of Islam a helpful list of titles for further reading on the topic. This last work is published by The Knights of Columbus and found here: <http://www.kofc.org/un/en/resources/cis/cis317.pdf>.*

## *Understanding Islam: A Guide for Catholic Educators*

### **Introduction**

Today we are bombarded with conflicting versions of Muslims and Islam in the media. This guide is intended to help all people involved in catechesis and education in the Roman Catholic Church to present Islam accurately and in ways that preserve and promote “together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom” (*Nostra Aetate* 3). In spite of the many conflicts and hostilities that have arisen between Muslims and Christians over the centuries, as Christians we are called to reject violence and to live in fraternal love with all human beings. This document intends to identify some of those beliefs and values that Muslims and Christians have in common, as well as some differences, so as to assist those whom we are teaching to live harmoniously together with understanding and respect and to work for peace more effectively.

### **Understanding Islam and Muslims**

The name *Islam* means “submission” and those who submit to God are *Muslims*. The terms have the same Arabic root as the word for peace, *salam*. Muslims believe that peace comes through the submission to the one and only God. Although it is often associated with Muslims alone, the name of God in Arabic, Allah (*al-Lah* – “the God”), is the same name used by Christians and Jews. When saying the name of Allah, Muslims generally say: “*Subhanahu wa ta’aalaa*”, which means “May He be glorified and exalted”. Muslims and Christians share many common beliefs in their worship of a single Creator God who loves creation and who commands that His most cherished creations, human beings, love Him, one another, and His creation.

In some ways, however, Muslims and Christians have profoundly different beliefs. Muslims do not believe in the Trinitarian nature of God, nor do they accept that Jesus Christ is God incarnate. They believe, however, that Jesus is one of the five most distinguished Prophets of God sent to mankind. Christians, on the other hand, do not recognize Muhammad as a prophet, and do not accept many aspects of the message he preached, including dietary restrictions, polygamy, and other teachings discussed below. For Muslims, Muhammad is the recipient of God’s final revelation, the *Qur’an*, and the model for all human beings, in much the same way as the Virgin Mary is for many Christians. But Muhammad’s role as prophet, law giver and military leader is more similar to that of Moses in the Old Testament. Muhammad is not worshipped by Muslims – he is recognized by them as the final Prophet, the Seal of the prophets, sent by God and is the object of great reverence and devotion. Christians do not accord Muhammad the same status as the biblical prophets, but may regard him as a prophetic figure on such issues as charity and the protection of the poor, widows and orphans.

## Muhammad and the Beginnings of Islam

Muslims believe that Islam originated with the creation of humanity. According to Islam, the first man, Adam, was the first Muslim and first Prophet of God, and Muhammad was the last of a long line of Prophets whom Allah sent to guide mankind. Muhammad was born at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century into a complex society made up of nomadic and sedentary tribes, many of whom were involved in caravan trade. Much of pre-Islamic Arabia is shrouded in mystery, but it is fairly certain that well-established communities of Christians and Jews of various denominations lived alongside a variety of polytheistic and monotheistic groups before Muhammad's time. At the center of trade and religious life was the city of Mecca. This city was home to an important shrine, the Kaba, that contained idols worshiped by the many Arabian tribes. According to Muslim tradition, the Kaba is in reality the House built by Abraham and his son Ishmael for the worship of One God. However, over the passage of time the worship of One God faded away and polytheism became widespread.

Muhammad had been born into a powerful tribe, the Quraish, but his position as an orphan from a young age left him very vulnerable. His awareness of this vulnerability made him particularly sensitive to the plight of widows and orphans, and many of the rules and customs he later institutes reflect his concern for those without protection in society. Fortunately for Muhammad, his uncle took him in and taught him the caravan trade, at which tradition says he excelled. He eventually married Khadijah, who was herself a successful merchant. Although he had many children, at his death he was survived by only one daughter, Fatima.

Around the year 610 AD, Muslim tradition says that Muhammad began receiving the revelation from God when the Angel Gabriel commanded him to recite what would be given to him in his native language of Arabic. His followers believe that over the next 22 years, until his death, he continued to receive these messages. At first he and the small group of followers he gathered around himself believed that the messages were intended to draw Arabic-speaking polytheists to the monotheism preached by the prophets of the Jews and Christians. Later he came to see that the messages are not exactly the same as what is contained in the Bible, but rather are given to confirm, correct and continue what Jews and Christians had already received. This idea has had significant impact on the relationship among Jews, Christians and Muslims over the centuries.

Although Muhammad's message was welcomed by some of his fellow Meccans, tradition says that many were afraid it would destroy the custom of pilgrimage to the Kaba and other shrines. As a consequence of the threats he received, in 622 in an event known as the *Hijra* (emigration), Muhammad and his followers moved to a small oasis in the north. This oasis becomes known as the City of the Prophet, *madinat al-nabi*, or simply Madina (modern-day Medina). Muslims count this year as the beginning of the new era and the year 622 is year one in the Muslim calendar.

## **The Formation of the Muslim *Ummah* in Madina and Conquest of Mecca**

It was in Madina that Muhammad and his followers began to establish the basic structure of what would become the Muslim community, the *Ummah*. Muhammad had been invited by local tribes to be an arbiter, a type of judge who negotiated peaceful settlements. His followers paid close attention to the ways he put the revelations he had received into practice, and they passed these on in the form of short accounts. The practices, or traditions, established by Muhammad are called *sunnah*, and were passed on in narratives called *ahadith*. The *sunnah* and interpretations of them were developed into the second source of Islamic Law (*Shari'ah*), after the Qur'an.

One can see many close parallels between central values of Jews and Christians and the legal precedents set by Muhammad in this period. For example, the *sunnah* protect the rights of the poor, women and children, and are especially concerned with justice for widows and orphans. Muhammad became known for his honesty and truthfulness, and he has been regarded as a model for all Muslims over the centuries. When mentioning the name of Muhammad, many Muslims will say “*Salallahu alayhi wa sallam*”, meaning “May God honor him and grant him peace”.

During the time in Madina, Muhammad's small community grew and he raised a small band of armed men that engaged in various raids. Eventually they clashed with the armies of Mecca, capturing the city in 630. His first act when he entered the city was to cleanse the Kaba and rededicate it to the One God. Muhammad's conduct towards the conquered peoples of Mecca is significant, and it set the precedent for Muslim expansion in the following centuries. Those who had been defeated were given a choice. If they were polytheists they could resist and be executed or enslaved, or they could accept the message of monotheism and recognize Muhammad as the prophet of God. Jews and Christians, since they were monotheists whose prophets were recognized as forerunners of Muhammad, were given the possibility of submitting to Muhammad's authority and paying a special tax, the *jizyah*, based on the qur'anic verse in Surah 9:29, in return for the freedom to practice their religions within certain limits. This became the practice of Muslim conquerors in the centuries following Muhammad's death.

As a result of the continued success of his army, Muhammad's fame as a military leader spread and many tribes in Arabia, following the ancient custom, came to pay him tribute and swear their allegiance. After a brief period during which Mecca was established as the center of worship and pilgrimage for the Muslim community, Muhammad died in 632 AD. With his death, a dispute arose as to who should succeed him – his closest male heir, or a person elected from among his followers. Some argued that Ali, his cousin and husband of his daughter Fatima, was the natural successor. The majority, however, favored Abu Bakr, who was one of the first followers of Muhammad. Although Ali was eventually chosen as the fourth successor, or *caliph*,

his death set in motion a deep division between the *Shi'a* (*Shi'at Ali* – the ‘partisans of Ali’) and the *Sunni* (those who follow tradition) that exists even today. The Shi'a came to dominate Persia, modern day Iran, but remained a minority. Today approximately 10% of Muslims worldwide are Shi'ites, while 90% are Sunni.

After Muhammad's death, his successors and their armies enjoyed phenomenal military success as they gained territory from western India through North Africa and into Spain and southern France. Most of these areas were populated by Jews, Christians and adherents of various Persian religions. Although initially very few converted to the religion of their rulers, over the next few centuries Islam grew until it represented the majority in some places. The *Qur'an* contains a strong prohibition against coercing monotheists to convert, but heavy taxation of non-Muslims, as well as the attractiveness of some Islamic teachings, led to the conversion or emigration of Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians.

The peace and stability created by the unification of warring empires under Muslim rule allowed a cultural flowering that had worldwide significance. Muslim thinkers sought to articulate their religious beliefs and connect them with ancient traditions of philosophy and science, collecting important Greek, Persian and Syriac texts and supporting their translation into Arabic. As a consequence, Islamic culture was host to an explosion of advances in the sciences, medicine, philosophy, mathematics, agriculture, bookmaking, art and architecture which made their way through Spain to become the catalyst for the European Renaissance.

The Mongolian invasions in the 13<sup>th</sup> century brought indescribable destruction to the centers of Muslim and Christian (particularly that of the Assyrian Church of the East) learning and culture of the east, creating space for the rise of the Ottoman Turks. The empire took its name from Osman I, the leader of a small Turkic tribe that had filled the power vacuum left by the demise of the Seljuk Turks in 1300. The Seljuks had converted to Islam earlier, paving the way for other Turkic tribes and eventually the Mongolians to convert as well. After a complicated shift in power, an alliance of Turkish tribes conquered Constantinople and made it their capital in 1453. In a grand symbolic gesture, the ancient cathedral *Hagia Sophia* was converted into a mosque and the name of the city changed to Istanbul. The Ottoman Empire grew rapidly and at its height nearly one third of the world's population lived under Ottoman rule. Ottoman armies presented a constant threat to Eastern Europe, and were only definitively defeated in 1683 outside of Vienna. Subsequent European imperialism during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries resulted in another shift in power, eventually bringing nearly all Muslim territories under European control.

The modern period has brought many changes to areas of Muslim-majority populations. Following the First World War, the caliphate was officially abolished, leaving the *Ummah* without a symbolic unifier. Although the caliphate was not a monolithic institution, for many Muslims its dissolution represented the fragmentation of the Muslim community. In the last

century, many movements have proposed different responses to modernity, a process which has engaged Muslims worldwide.

Today Muslims can be found in nearly every country in the world, and more and more, they are neither Arab nor Arabic-speaking. In fact, the largest populations are found in Indonesia where Islam was introduced through trade with India in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. In these and many other places, Muslims live side by side with non-Muslims, integrating their deeply held beliefs in diverse societies and cultures.

### **Islamic Scripture: The *Qur'an***

Muslims center their religious life around a text known as the *Qur'an*, which means “recitation”. The *Qur'an* is the collection of verses Muslims believe were given by God to Muhammad throughout his life. Muhammad came to understand the experiences during which Angel Gabriel told him to “recite” what would be given to him as moments of divine revelation. The recitations were memorized and passed on orally and were written down and memorized by his followers until they were collected together in a single book not long after his death.

The Islamic understanding of revelation is very different from that of Catholics.<sup>1</sup> Muslims believe that the messages Muhammad received are essentially literal excerpts from a divine Book that contains God’s will and guidance for the whole human race. Thus, Muslims believe, the actual text, even the language of Arabic, is God’s Word. It is not the product of human writing, thought, or activity, even though certain verses may have been “sent down” as guides for particular occasions. For this reason, Muslims hold that the *Qur'an* is *literally* God’s word and should be read in the original Arabic.

Tradition maintains that the *Qur'an* was collected by the first Caliph, Abu Bakr, while the third caliph, Uthman, standardized the recitation and script in the year 651 AD. In order to emphasize its timelessness, it was not organized according to the dates in which Muhammad received it, but rather into *surahs*, or chapters, generally from longest to shortest. Each *surah* is given a name to remind the reader of its contents. Thus, after the Opening, *Surah 2*, entitled “The Cow”, is the longest of the *surahs* and contains a story of a cow sacrificed by the Israelites.

Among the many themes found in the *Qur'an*, four stand out. The first is the command to *worship the One God*, Allah. A central teaching of the *Qur'an* is *tawhid*, the absolute Oneness of God, which means that only the Lord and Creator of the universe may be worshiped, and that nothing in one’s life can be placed equal to or before God. For Christians, it is important to recognize that the *Qur'an* explicitly rejects the worship of God as Trinity and the belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God as contradicting the teaching of *tawhid*.

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<sup>1</sup> A helpful document regarding this topic, *Revelation: Catholic and Muslim Perspectives*, was researched by the Midwest Catholic-Muslim Dialogue Group and published by the USCCB in 2005.

A second theme is that God has given the same revelation to various *prophets* throughout human history, beginning with Adam and ending with Muhammad. Many of the notable figures of the Old and New Testaments, such as Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Zachariah, and Jesus, are recognized in the *Qur'an* as prophets. Whereas Jews and Christians have understood prophets to be first and foremost persons who interpret and remind the community of the obligations of the Covenant with God, Muslims hold prophets to be those men chosen by God to receive the warning to do good and to avoid evil. Thus, the message received is always the same. Muhammad is believed by Muslims to have received the final confirmation and authoritative version of all previous revelations, and so he is the last prophet, the Seal of the prophets. Thus, Muslims do not think of themselves as belonging to a *new* religion, but rather to the final community that has received God's original message.

These first two themes are summarized in the phrase, called the *Shahada* ("declaration of faith"), repeated by Muslims many times each day: *la ilaha ila l-Lah, Muhammad rasulu l'Lah* ("there is no god but God (Allah) (and) Muhammad is the Messenger of God"). This forms the center of Muslim belief.

The third theme follows as a consequence from the first two – the obligation to *command what is good and forbid what is evil*, which is the basis of justice (*'adl*). Those who do this will receive their reward in Paradise after the Day of Judgment. Those who do what is evil and do not repent before they die will suffer eternal damnation. The goal of the Muslim community is to create an environment in which it is easy to do good and avoid evil, and so form a just society that submits itself wholly to God's will.

A fourth important theme tied closely to the previous three is the expectation of the future bodily Resurrection from the Dead. In the *Qur'an*, this event is often referred to as "The Hour"; it is the Day of Judgment when all of Creation will finally come to an end and every person will stand before God. At that time their good and bad deeds will be judged, and no one else can answer or intercede for another person except by God's permission. Following the consequences of a person's earthly deeds, punishment and reward are allotted by God's judgment. Because human beings are bodily creatures, Muslims have generally emphasized the physical nature of the reward and punishment, and detailed descriptions of both are found in the *Qur'an* and in tradition.

Many more themes can be identified in the *Qur'an*, but these are considered central. Most importantly, the *Qur'an* is regarded by Muslims as a complete guide for humanity, and is meant to be applied to every aspect of everyday life.

## **Islamic Way of Life: The *Ummah* and *Shari'ah***

From its very beginnings, the Muslim community, called the *Ummah*, has been centered on building a well-ordered community in which the innocent and vulnerable are protected. Unlike Christianity, Islam has placed little emphasis on the importance of belief as the unifying characteristic of the community, choosing instead to identify the *Ummah* with those who express their submission to God through observance of certain practices, ritual and laws. Whereas Christians have generally considered the Church to be the community of those who profess a common faith, Muslims have argued that only God can know the true beliefs of an individual, making faith alone an unreliable indicator of belonging to the community. Thus, the *Ummah* is defined by the space within which people follow a particular way of life. This way of life, *Shari'ah* ("path" or "way"), creates the environment in which human beings can most perfectly bring God's justice to Creation. Muslims believe that because human beings are creatures, their ability to create a just society on their own is limited. Thus, it is paramount that every person submits his will to God's as it has been made clear in the revelation.

Unlike Christianity, Islam did not develop a strong central religious hierarchy or clergy. Those who are identified as 'clergy' are usually scholars of law or tradition. Like monastic prayer, Muslim prayer can be performed individually or in community, and does not require a specially trained priest. Traditionally, the leader, or *imam*, was a man who had been identified as particularly pious or could recite the *Qur'an* well. Today many imams do spend significant time studying the *Qur'an*, commentaries and perhaps theology, but there is no formal 'ordination'. Rather, in keeping with the centrality of justice, over time the *Ummah* developed a system of legal scholars and interpreters who formed the backbone of religious life. In many ways *Shari'ah* became the unifier of the universal *Ummah*.

In fact, very few laws can be found explicitly in the *Qur'an* itself. Rather, Muslims identify Muhammad's practices and those of the early community as the best model. Oral traditions of Muhammad's sayings, practices and legal decisions, called *sunnah* ("practice") were collected along with an account of the reliability (the *isnad*) of those who transmitted them into brief reports called *ahadith* (singular, *hadith*). The *ahadith* form the foundation for much of *Shari'ah*, and Muslims are generally hesitant to deviate from Muhammad's own practice; indeed, many try to emulate it as much as possible, even following him in dress and other daily customs.

By following these rituals and practices, Muslims believe that the *Ummah* can over time create the perfect society ordered according to God's commands. Later jurists sometimes distinguished areas governed by Muslim rulers and *Shari'ah* as the *Dar al-Islam* ("House of Islam", sometimes also called the *Dar al-Salam*, "House of Peace"), and the lands beyond as the *Dar al-Harb* ("House of War"), reflecting the expansionist vision of many rulers. In recent times, this distinction has been invoked by those who desire to revive *Shari'ah* as a counterweight to European and American styles of law.

## Duties to God: Practices and Beliefs

*Shari'ah* consists of the six Pillars of Faith and the Duties to God and to Family and Society. The Pillars of Faith are similar to the articles of the Christian creeds, but differ in that they have been identified by consensus over the centuries (not by an authoritative body such as clergy) and are not recited liturgically. Briefly, they are:

1. *Belief in One God.*
2. *Belief in the Angels.* Unlike human beings, angels have not been granted free will. Muslims believe that two or more angels are assigned to each human being to keep a record of all of the deeds and actions until the Day of Judgment.
3. *Belief in the Revealed Scriptures.*
4. *Belief in the Prophets.* According to the *Qur'an*, Adam was the first prophet and from Abraham came a long line of prophets through his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael was the forefather of the Arab people and thus of Prophet Mohammad, and, from Isaac descended Jacob, Moses, David, John the Baptist and Jesus.
5. *Belief in the Hereafter.* Islam teaches that God created human beings and that each person is born pure without sin. God has given guidance through the prophets, and every individual will be held accountable for his performance in the worldly life before God on the Day of Judgment after resurrection.
6. *Belief in the Divine Decree.* Islam teaches that everything that is or happens in the universe, from the smallest to the greatest events, is controlled by God and is a part of His eternal plan. This belief is coupled with the perception that all events, happy or sad, in ease or suffering, are a part of God's wise plan and are for the ultimate benefit of humanity.

*Shari'ah* has been further divided by Muslim scholars into two types of duties: *Duties to God* and *Duties to Family and Society*. Although they can never truly be separated, it is recognized that these apply to different aspects of the life of the individual and community. The Duties to God have been summarized in the so-called "Five Pillars". These are not found listed as a group anywhere in the *Qur'an*, and some Muslims would include others. The traditional Five Pillars are the following:

- 1) *Shahada* ("declaration of faith"): This is the belief, acceptance and proclamation of the phrase, *There is no god but God (Allah), Muhammad is the Messenger of God*. Muslims make this statement numerous times in prayer and during other rituals. In normal circumstances, to become a Muslim it is only necessary to repeat this phrase with conviction, preferably before a witness. There is no formal process of preparation or particular ritual necessary to become a Muslim.

- 2) *Salat* (“prayer”): Muslims pray in the direction of the *Kaba* (located in Mecca) five times each day as an acknowledgement of submission to the One God worshipped by Abraham. Before beginning prayer, Muslims perform ritual ablutions to purify and prepare themselves. *Salat* involves repetition of certain prayers accompanied by standing, bowing, prostration and other movements. The times of daily prayer is determined by the position of the sun, much like the monastic Liturgy of the Hours, and may be done alone or with others. A special prayer gathering on Fridays, called *Jum’ah*, is required of all adult males, while women and children are encouraged to attend, and is usually done in a mosque led by a leader called an *imam*. This prayer also usually includes two sermons by the *imam* or other leader.
- 3) *Zakat* (“almsgiving”): All Muslims with sufficient financial means are obliged to give 2.5% of their annual assets to the poor and needy. This act is considered to be one of the greatest charitable duties, and is done in addition to voluntary charities given to support of the mosque, school, or other institutions.
- 4) *Sawm* (“fasting”): During the month of Ramadan Muslims fast as an act of worship, as well as a time to reflect upon the moment when Muhammad began to receive messages through the Angel Gabriel. Muslims follow a lunar calendar, so the month moves through the Western (solar) calendar and does not fall at the same time each year. Ramadan is a month of purification and Muslims avoid eating, drinking and sexual activity during daylight hours, while the nights are filled with celebration and feasting, but also with additional acts of worship. Ramadan ends with the great feast of Eid al-Fitra which is marked by donations of food to the poor, common prayer and feasting with friends and relatives.
- 5) *Hajj* (“pilgrimage”): The annual pilgrimage to Mecca, the Hajj, is an obligation only for those who are physically and financially able to perform it. Nevertheless, about five million people go to Mecca each year from every corner of the globe. Although Mecca is always filled with visitors, the annual Hajj begins in the twelfth month of the Islamic Lunar year. Pilgrims wear special clothes, simple garments which strip away distinctions of class and culture, so that all stand equally before God.

Most Hajj rituals are traced back to Prophet Abraham, his wife Hagar and his son Ismail.

As important as these Five Pillars are, Muslims have always recognized that building a just society requires more. As a result, an entire structure of law and customs grew out of the early practices and legal decisions made by Muhammad and his first followers. As Muslim armies conquered territory, Islamic influence was asserted first through taxation and then the development of full-blown legal systems. In many ways similar to Jewish law, *Shari’ah* aims to submit every aspect of human life to God’s will. *Shari’ah* includes observance of food purity (for

example, prohibition of alcohol and pork, rules concerning the proper slaughter of animals, and other actions and foods, called *halal*), regulations concerning marriage, divorce, family life and child rearing, commerce, governance, and criminal activity. Contrary to popular belief, Islamic law is generally very flexible in accommodating particular situations. Very few punishments are prescribed by the law, and in some cases, such as divorce or breach of contract, plaintiffs may seek the council of several judges before accepting a verdict.

Today Muslims generally try to follow one of four major Sunni systems or two major Shi'ite systems of law. The systems, or schools, are characterized by differing views on the role of precedents and accommodation of local customs and culture. A great difficulty for many Muslims is how to observe the tenets of Islamic law in non-Muslim societies, especially when these conflict with the law of the land. For example, polygamy is allowed in Islamic law, but prohibited in most non-Islamic countries. Other difficult situations include child custody in divorce and divorce settlements, banking, usury and interest, and the separate roles of men and women. Some Muslim revivalists have looked forward to the re-establishment of a *Dar al-Islam* in which *Shari'ah* can be practiced without restriction again, while others are arguing for a new 'school' that can accommodate modern realities.

Perhaps the two greatest challenges posed by the modern world are expectations concerning the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, and the roles of men and women. *Shari'ah* saw its greatest development during the time in which the *Ummah* was increasing in power and authority, and reflects the privileged position given to Islam. Although non-Muslim monotheists were tolerated and protected as *Dhimmi*, historically they were never granted equal status in Islamic societies. Many laws were written to prevent influence or expansion of other religious communities, including prohibitions on building or repairing places of worship, gaining converts, having political authority over Muslims, or public expression of religious beliefs. The enforcement of these rules depended on the local ruler, and there are many notable exceptions of non-Muslims who enjoyed great influence in Muslim society. Nonetheless, the contemporary expectation of the neutrality of state vis-à-vis religion has posed serious challenges for traditional approaches to *Shari'ah*.

A second challenge is the contemporary shift away from traditional roles for men and women to one of equality and self-determination. Although the *Qur'an* introduced many regulations intended to protect the dignity of women, such as a prohibition against burying unwanted infant girls, the requirement for the woman's consent to be married, and the right of women to inheritance and dowries, there are many aspects of *Shari'ah* that enshrine a clear separation between men and women, and place women under the protection and authority of men in order to preserve harmony in the community. This problem is certainly not unique to Islam; nonetheless, the position of the *Qur'an* as the unquestionable word of God and the role of Muhammad as its best interpreter have made it difficult to accommodate contemporary views of women and marriage.

In the final analysis, *Shari'ah* is first and foremost concerned with promotion of justice and desire to command good and forbid evil. It proposes a well-ordered society that encourages submission to God in every aspect of the person's life and puts the good of the community at the center. As Muslims engage modernity with its plurality of religions and ideologies, it is unclear what role *Shari'ah* has in its traditional sense. Some are arguing for a modified version, particularly focusing on the duties to God; others maintain that this reductionism is a corrupt accommodation of injustice and undermines true Islamic beliefs. The conclusion of this debate is yet to be decided.

## Contemporary Issues

Like so much else, relations between Muslims and Christians have reached a unique moment in our history. On the one hand, tensions and turmoil in the Middle East continue as different political and religious groups vie for power and the right to claim that their understanding of Islam is orthodox. On the other hand, unprecedented movements towards reconciliation between the two communities can be found in every corner of society. In this section we wish to draw attention to only a few of the areas in which the dialogues of life, action, theological exchange and experience are taking up points of conflict and disagreement (*Dialogue and Proclamation*, 42)

### *Religious War: Jihad and Crusade*

It has become a truism today that religion is a primary source of conflict; indeed some argue that the only way to a peaceful world is to eliminate religious belief altogether. For many people the historical fact of religious war is a serious obstacle to faith. This should be of great concern for all who live and teach the Catholic faith. Coming to terms with past conflict and understanding its ongoing effects in society cannot be done quickly, but should nonetheless be a priority in teaching.

First and foremost, it is important that educators take care not to hand on stereotypes or ideological interpretations of past events. Recent research and study has given us a much more complex picture of the motivations of those who have participated in armed conflict in the past, calling into question the assumed 'religious' nature of many wars. Without minimizing the profound effects that war in the name of religious ideals has had on societies throughout the centuries, it is important to recognize that the vast majority of Muslims and Christians never participated in such conflicts, nor do those conflicts in any way represent what they hold to be the life-giving facets of their religious traditions.

Much, much more work needs to be done in these areas, and educators must strive to promote honest reflection on the role of religious communities in past conflict. Catholics are explicitly called to take to heart the directive in *Nostra Aetate* 3 that urges us to leave the past

aside to work for a deeper understanding of each other's beliefs, and to find the common ground of understanding, respect and collaboration wherever possible for the good of all of humanity. This goal should always be apparent in the presentation of the material.

### *Nostra Aetate and the Common Word*

In one of the very last documents to be promulgated, the Second Vatican Council issued *Nostra Aetate* (the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*), which includes a foundational section on Islam in §3. The document outlines in brief terms those aspects of Islam that Catholics can appreciate as signs of God's presence, and that perhaps form the basis for a peaceful common society.

In recent times, a group of Muslim scholars wrote a document in the same spirit entitled *A Common Word Between Us and You* (2007), which has gained widespread praise in the Muslim community. The document is unique, not so much for its content (which can be found in the writings of individual scholars over the centuries), but for its position as a common statement of belief that represents Muslims worldwide. At its heart is the conviction that Christians and Muslims share a common belief in the divine commands regarding love of God and love of neighbor, and that this can be common ground to build upon.

Without covering over differences in faith and practice between the two religious communities, these two documents call Muslims and Christians together to overcome the quarrels and hostilities that have arisen over the centuries (NA 3). They give us hope that with the proper attitude and openness to God's call we can become signs of peace in the world and a positive witness to the children of God living together in harmony.

### *Religious Liberty*

Finally, a significant topic in interreligious discussion today is the necessity of religious liberty for all people in every society. In some cases, it is secular or anti-religious forces that seek to limit religious practice, and in these cases adherents of all religions have a stake in defending religious liberty. But it is unfortunately true that some religious communities promote the limitation on practice of other religions and do not grant the freedom to choose one's religion for oneself. This limitation is a form of coercion, whether implicit or explicit, and violates the deepest convictions of both Muslims and Christians.

### **Conclusion**

The role of educators in shaping future generations of the religious communities in which they live and work is enormous, and care must be taken to ensure that the true faith is passed on while at the same time respecting the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of every individual. Religious educators are faced with a difficult task – on the one hand, they are charged with helping to bring understanding so that past conflict can be put aside and healed, with protecting

and promoting the good of each person, and with drawing every human being closer to God. On the other hand, they are given the further task of providing an interreligious component in the overall formation of students in order to assist them in making sense of the context that shapes the experience of people from differing faith traditions—not least with those who are already held in great suspicion and subject to negative stereotypes such as American Muslims. This requires that care be taken not to paint all people with the same brush, as if there are no individuals or disagreements, as if humanity is not on a journey toward the perfection that can only be accomplished by God.

Muslims and Christians share the deep conviction that all people are God's creations who are on a journey back to their Divine Source. In the end the task before us is to act in the best possible way, living in the hope that God will accept our work and judge our differences with mercy, and knowing that everything we have received is ultimately from God.

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