What is Islam?

- *Islam* = submission (to God); *muslim* = one who submits to God.
- Confession of faith (*shahada*): ‘There is no God but God; Muhammad is the messenger of God.’

Muhammad and the Origins of Islam

- For Muslims, Muhammad is not normally called the ‘founder’ of Islam; Islam as primordial religion (from time of Adam); the natural religion for humanity.
- Islamic understanding of religious history; affinities with Judaism and Christianity but distinct from them.
- Prophets sent by God to preach monotheism and righteousness; eg Abraham, Moses and Jesus (all prophets of Islam). Muhammad as last prophet.
- Outline of Muhammad’s life:
  - 610: Called to be a prophet. Preaches to Meccans.
  - 622: *Hijra* (migration) to Medina. Founds first Islamic society/state. ‘Muhammad was his own Constantine.’
  - Meccans defeated; Islam accepted throughout Arabian peninsula.
  - 632: Muhammad dies.
- Significance of Muhammad:
  - ‘Seal of the prophets’. Final brick in the building.
  - The ‘illiterate prophet’ – the Qur’an in no sense his work.
  - Sinless; perfect example of human conduct; intercessor on Last Day.
  - Focus of devotion; ‘peace be upon him’; anger over cartoons etc.
- Disputed succession to Muhammad; origins of Sunni – Shi’i divide.
- Expansion of Islamic Empire over following 100 years – from Spain to India.

What is the Qur’an?

- Seen by Muslims as compilation of messages revealed by God to Muhammad via angel Gabriel. Memorized by believers and preserved in original Arabic.
- The Qur’an only is the Qur’an in Arabic; translations useful but not the Qur’an. Contrast with Bible translations.
Islamic understanding of revelation. Compare Qur’an and Bible or Qur’an and Christ? Word made Flesh/Word made Book.

Islam based on both Qur’an and traditions about Muhammad (Hadith, Sunna).

Islamic Belief and Practice

- Summary of key beliefs
  - Oneness of God (Tawhid)
  - Prophecy/revelation (Risala)
  - The Afterlife (Akhirah)

- Belief and practice. Shari’a - God’s revealed way for humans to live. Concern for transformation of both individual and society; historical norm for Muslims is to live in a Muslim society.

- Five pillars of Islam:
  - Confession of faith (shahada)
  - Prayer (salat)
  - Almsgiving (zakat)
  - Fasting (sawm) in the month of Ramadan
  - Pilgrimage (Hajj) to Mecca and Medina

- Sufism: emphasis on experience, interior reality of Islam alongside external obedience.

Islam in the World Today

- Through most of history Muslim experience has been of political power. Great Islamic empires. Muslims have typically lived under Islamic rule.


- Islamism (aka fundamentalism, revivalism, Islamic movements…): e.g. Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt 1928 (many other such organisations); aiming to reassert Islamic identity of Muslim world against Western rule and influence and westernised regimes. Seeking Islamic states (eg Pakistan, Iran) under Islamic law. Variety of approaches: some working gradually through political process; others outside it, using violence.

- *Jihad* literally = ‘struggle’; Muslims debate its meaning and application today.
• Migration since 1950s has created significant new Muslim minorities outside the Muslim world, raising the question of what it means to be Muslim and American/British etc.

What do Muslims think about Christianity?

• Islam’s distinctive view of religious history, culminating in Muhammad.

• Jesus (Isa) respected as great prophet, but understood in Islamic terms:
  o Forerunner of Muhammad (like John the Baptist to Jesus).
  o Preached same message as Muhammad and all other prophets.
  o Virgin birth and miracles, but not Son of God.
  o Did not die on the cross; raised alive to Heaven; will come again.

• Original message of Jesus essentially the same as Islam; so why has the Christianity we know today deviated from this?
  o Followers of Jesus mistakenly started worshipping him as Son of God and speaking of God as Trinity; Jesus would disapprove.
  o The New Testament is a mixture of truth and error. The text has been corrupted (Tahrif). No need to read it as all truth is in the Qur’an.

• Muslims take a range of views of Christianity and Christians (‘People of the Book’), but all involve some balance of affirmation and criticism.

• Islamic witness (da’wa) to Christians. Converts.

• ‘We Muslims respect Jesus as a prophet. Why don’t you Christians respect Muhammad as a prophet?’ Discuss…

Christian Responses to Islam: Intelligence, Humility, Confidence

• Intelligence
  o History of profoundly unintelligent Christian responses to Islam based on inaccurate caricatures. Opportunity today to seek to overcome legacy of conflict and fear through better understanding of Islam, not least through presence in the West of substantial Muslim communities. This does not require compromise of Christian faith nor idealization of Islam and the avoidance of all hard questions.
  o Command to love neighbour as self involves attempt to understand them in their otherness from us. This might include: learning what Muslims actually believe and how their faith motivates them; grasping how developments in world today look through Muslim eyes; understanding the diversity within Islam; avoiding lazy stereotypes about Muslims; never comparing the best in Christianity with the worst in Islam; discerning carefully where Muslims and Christians can cooperate for the common good...
  o Important not to depend solely on Christian or other outsider accounts of Islam; need to listen to Muslims themselves. Need also to keep in
mind experience of Christians living alongside Muslims around the world in varied and sometimes difficult contexts.

- **Humility**
  - Strand of biblical passages encouraging openness to what God has to say to us through those beyond our faith community: eg Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18-20); Job; Cyrus (Isaiah 45:1-7); the Book of Jonah; Jesus’ encounters with Samaritans and Gentiles; the Good Samaritan…
  - Learning from Muslims’ discipline in prayer; approaches to public life (eg banking?); individual-communal balance etc. Need careful discernment: Islam raises important questions for Christians to reflect on, even if it will rarely be appropriate for Christians simply to adopt Islamic solutions to contemporary problems.
  - Is God addressing us through Muslims, calling us to become more faithful in our Christian discipleship?

- **Confidence**
  - In dialogue, Muslims often more confident than Christians; they have a clear view of Christianity and may ask hard questions; Christians may feel they should play down the differences.
  - Muslim questions about ‘God in Christ’ are a salutary challenge to develop a more deeply considered and confident Christian faith, concerning, eg, ‘Word made flesh’, Trinity, Cross, Bible.
  - Christians have always been called to give ‘reasons for the hope that is within us … with gentleness and respect’ (1 Peter 3:15), in response to Muslims or anyone else. Where such confidence grows together with intelligence and humility, Christians are simply being authentically themselves.

**Resources**

**Muslim works**
- Reza Aslan, *No god but God*
- Abul A’la Mawdudi, *Towards Understanding Islam*
- Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam; The Heart of Islam*

**Christian responses**
- Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*
- Colin Chapman, *Cross and Crescent*
- Christian Troll SJ, *Dialogue & Difference*
  - Muslims Ask, Christians Answer ([http://aam.s1205.t3isp.de/?L=1](http://aam.s1205.t3isp.de/?L=1))
- Jacques Jomier, *Understanding Islam; The Bible and the Qur’an*

**Other useful books**
- Jason Burke, *al-Qaeda*
- Edward E. Curtis, *Muslims in America: a Short History*

**Some Websites**
- [http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/networks/building_bridges](http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/networks/building_bridges)
- [www.anglicannifcon.org](http://www.anglicannifcon.org)