

**Islam 101**  
**Transcript of Part 1**  
**Overview and What Muslims believe about the Qur'an**

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What I'd like to do tonight is to provide you with some very broad overviews of the Islamic tradition and what Muslims believe. Hopefully we'll shatter some stereotypes that might have been caused by something called the media, [laughter] and hopefully you'll leave here with a deeper understanding of what it is that Muslims believe and why their faith tradition is so dear to them.

I thought we might begin with a little bit of math. Just to make the point that Muslims and Christians combined, as of 2012 we're about 54.7% of the global population. Today it's closer to 61% of the total population, and I would suggest that that means that the well-being and future of the world really do depend on the ability of Muslims and Christians to find ways of working together to address global concerns and challenges.

Often times we hear Muslims say, in the news, "Well, you know, Islam is a religion of peace." And then we hear other people say, "Well, no, Islam is really a religion of war." And so when Muslims express that they feel that Islam is a religion of peace, they're trying to tell you something about the Arabic language.

Not to get into too many linguistics here, but Arabic words are formed on the basis of three root letters. And you'll note up here, in the bold print, that the words for Islam—the religion, meaning submission; a Muslim—who would be a person who adheres to the faith of Islam; and the word for peace, *Salaam*—all share those same three root letters of S, L, M. And so what Muslims are trying to convey is that submission to God is intended to lead to relationships of peace between God and oneself, between God and other people, and ultimately, hopefully, with the whole world. So this idea of submission is supposed to guide your relationships with others.

Muslims believe that a book called the Qur'an is the final, perfect, and complete revelation that God gave to one individual, the prophet Muhammad, directly over a period of 22 years in the Arabic language. [It] may interest you to know that the purpose of the Qur'an was actually to confirm and reaffirm prior revelations, and the Qur'an often talks about the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospels as genuine revelations that were received from God and given to humanity. The concern was that there seemed to have been perhaps some errors

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and omissions or perhaps misinterpretations that were introduced over time, and this is why God revealed the Qur'an to sort of correct those problems once and for all.

Muslims often say that the Qur'an is inherently pluralist, meaning that it recognizes more than one faith tradition as being true, because there are verses that talk specifically about Jews, Christians, and Sabians, as people who will go to paradise in the afterlife if they live out the teachings of their faith tradition. So it's not a call for them all to convert to Islam, but to be faithful to the faith traditions that they do adhere to.

It also talks about how God could have made everybody exactly the same, but that God likes diversity and that God created diversity with a purpose. And the purpose was so that different tribes and nations and groups of people could come to know one another. In other words, human beings were created with the intent of living in community and building relationships with each other, rather than maintaining separateness.

When Muhammad received the revelation, it was spoken to him through the Angel Gabriel. And yes, this is the same Gabriel who appears in the New Testament to make the announcement to the Virgin Mary of the pending conception and birth of Jesus. Muhammad said sometimes it was very easy for him to hear what the angel was saying, and sometimes he had to listen really, really hard because there would be other noises, like bells were clanging in the background, and he really had to work hard to listen to what was being revealed to him.

Muslims believe that the Qur'an is literally the word of God spoken to Muhammad. And that is part of the reason why there has been some reluctance among Muslims to subject the Qur'an to the kind of historical and literary criticism that oftentimes occurs with respect to the Bible.

Anybody here read the Bible in its entirety? I'm Lutheran, so that's just part of what we have to do growing up. I was very shocked to learn from a Muslim friend of mine, early on, that the coming of Muhammad was actually foretold in the Bible. I said, "Really? Because I don't remember reading that part. Could you tell me where it was?"

So no, no, it's in the Gospel, the Gospel of John. It's Chapter 16, verses 5 through 13, if you're interested. And this takes place on the night of Jesus's betrayal, just shortly before his arrest. He speaks to his disciples and he says:

Now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me, 'where are you going?' But because I have said these things, you are filled with grief. But I tell you the truth. It is for your good that I'm going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you and when he comes he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment. In regard to sin, because men do not believe in me. In regard to righteousness, because I'm going to the Father, where you can see me no longer. And in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of Truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own, he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.

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Christians understand that to be a reference to the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete. But Muslims, when they hear that passage, think about how the Qur'an was spoken to Prophet Muhammad, and that he spoke only what he heard. He was known as a counselor during his own lifetime. And he was someone whose message very clearly focused on warning of the judgment that was to come and condemnation of the ills of this world, not simply in terms of worshipping false idols, but also in terms of the widespread social injustice that existed at his time.

Like Christians, Muslims historically have debated what the best method of interpreting the Qur'an is. And there seems to be a tendency, when we interpret our own Scripture, that we do this in a polysemic way, that we recognize that there may be multiple meanings to any text, there are different ways in which you can read it. But when we read somebody else's revelation, oftentimes we tend to read it very literally and assume that what it says, literally, is what it means. And that can lead to, sometimes, some unfortunate interpretations.

And so I do want to assure you that there are many Muslim scholars who engage in polysemic interpretations of the text. It's not always literally, but they look to see how a particular theme might fit with respect to the entire Qur'an. They will look to see how particular terms are used throughout the entire text, so that you're not allowing one verse alone to offer you the final word on what the text actually says. There is attention to looking at themes—which themes are the most important, which ones are talked about the most, and what might that indicate to us—as to what we should think about it.

One thing that Muslims take very seriously is the memorization and recitation of the Qur'an. And they always do this in Arabic, regardless of whether or not they speak the language. That is done out of respect for the Arabic text as God's literal, revealed word to human beings.

If you've ever studied a foreign language, you know sometimes it's hard to fully translate certain words. They may have multiple meanings in the original language that you can't quite capture in English. And so there is this desire to preserve the Arabic language of the text.

Memorization and recitation are not just individual endeavors, but there are competitions held at local, national, and even international levels for recitation.