

Terms for Understanding

Below is a brief definition of terms that you may have heard before, and we will discuss today.

Allah: Muslims believe that the true meaning of the word Allah is beyond human comprehension and understanding. Literally, the word is Arabic for “The God”. Muslims believe that when they call upon Allah they are worshiping the same God that Jews and Christians worship. However, Muslims believe that God is only Master, not Father, and he demands obedience, not a relationship.

Islam: A religious tradition started in Arabia in the seventh century by the Prophet Muhammad. It is practiced today by over a billion people in the world.

Muslim: “One who submits (that is, surrenders himself) to the will of Allah”, in short it means “a Believer”. Most often it is specifically used to refer to one who believes in Islam. The word “Mu’men” also means believer.

The prophet Muhammad: According to Islamic tradition, the prophet Muhammad lived from 570-632 A.D. and began receiving revelations from Allah through the angel Gabriel from 610 all the way until his death in 632. Muslims believe that Muhammad was the final prophet, and that the prophets of the Jewish and Christian traditions were also give the true Word of God, but that men of those traditions corrupted Allah’s word for their own greedy reasons. Thus they believe Islam is the original faith, and the Islamic traditions are the true version of the revelation given to man from Allah.

Koran (Qur’an): literal mean is “recital” in Arabic. The Koran is the reciting of the exact words given to the Prophet Muhammad from Allah in Arabic through the angel Gabriel. To Muslims these are the exact words of Allah with no human interpretation or corruption. The Koran is the Muslim Holy Book, but to Muslims it is more similar to what Catholics think of the Eucharist. It is unchanging, but a living thing, not a book. The Koran is the collections of the revelations given to Muhammad. The Koran has 114 chapters called “Sura”. It is organized not by subject but instead by length of chapter, with Sura 1 being the longest and Sura 114 the shortest. Since the revelations were given to Muhammad in Arabic, Muslims do not believe translations are accurate, and therefore all Muslims are expected to learn Arabic so they can read the Koran in its authentic language and message. Many passages in the Koran are similar to those in the Bible. There are others that are not in the bible, but repeat passages from the Gnostic Gospels, writings the Church said were not true, and thus did not place in the Bible when the formal codex was completed in the 5th century. Many parts of the Koran are unique revelations to Muhammad.

Hadith: A collection of writings explaining how Muhammad lived out the teachings of the Koran. It is used to explain the traditions of Muhammad and thus to explain the teachings of the Koran. It was collected about 200 years after the life of Muhammad, when Islamic scholars went to great pains to define which traditions and teachings were correct and consistent with Muhammad’s revelation and which were false. There are 5 schools of Islamic theology today that have different interpretations of the Hadith.

Hajj: The holy pilgrimage to Mecca, where Muhammad was born and spent most of his life, and the prescribed rituals associated with the pilgrimage. This is the 4th pillar of Islam. All Muslims are expected

to make the pilgrimage once in their life, unless health or finances are such that the pilgrimage is not possible.

Ka'aba: The focal point of the Hajj. It is a cube shaped building made out of stone believed to have been built by Abraham. Muslims believe the Ka'aba is the very house of Allah on earth. It contains the black stone, which Allah is said to have thrown down from Heaven.

Sunnis Muslims: Sunni's are one of the two main sects of Islam. Approximately 85% of Muslims worldwide are Sunni. Sunni Muslims follow the doctrines and practices derived from the "Sunna of the Prophet", AKA the Hadith, as interpreted by Muslim scholars throughout history. After the death of Muhammad the larger Muslim community chose Abu Bakr to succeed him as Caliph (leader). Sunni's followed Abu Bakr and the Caliph (chosen leaders) that came after him. The line of Caliph continued from Abu Bakr through the Otomann empire and ends with WWI.

Shi'ites Muslims: Shi'ites split from Sunnis soon after the death of Muhammad. Following Muhammad's death a group of Muslims felt that only a relative, descendent, of Muhammad could succeed him. They rejected Abu Bakr as leader. They picked Muhammad's son-in-law, Ali as their leader following Muhammad. Shi'ites continued to follow only the teachings of the descendents of Muhammad called "Imams". According to Shi'ites there have been 12 Imams. Shi'ites are the predominate Muslim group in Iran and parts of Iraq. The practices and interpretation of the Shi'ites very greatly from Sunnis.

Jihad: The literal meaning is "to struggle, to strive hard, and to fight". Islamic extremists use this term, and the verses in the Koran that talk about Jihad to justify violence against all those who do not follow the Islamic faith. However, there are many passages in the Koran about Jihad and calling all Muslims to participate in Jihad. The passages can conflict with each other and led to the development of two definitions/ understandings of Jihad that developed between the 10-12th century.

Greater Jihad is a personal struggle of an individual to apply the tenets of Islam in daily life, and to live obediently and without sin. It is the inner moral struggle and call to live out one's faith. Christians can compare this to our call to pick up our cross and follow Christ in all aspects of our life.

Lesser Jihad involves fighting the enemies of Allah in order to enhance Allah's dominion in the world. This is often seen as physical combat, but can include other forms of fighting for converts to Islam including producing writings that defend Islam, evangelization, monetary support of Jihadist groups, and other actions violent and non-violent that grows the influence of Islam and Allah throughout the world. Muhammad did use war though to spread his revelations and to punish those who did not accept him as Allah's prophet. He also preached that true believers should use force to spread Allah's message and destroy non-believers.

5 Pillars of Islam: The five pillars of Islam are the central practices of Islamic faith. To Muslims, the practices (actions) are central. Pillars: 1) Confession of Faith (Shahada) "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His prophet", 2) Prayer (Salat), 3) Fasting (Sawn), 4) Pilgrimage (Hajj), 5) Almsgiving (Zakat).