

Islam and Christianity

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Meet the Writer

Jay T. Rock, the writer of this leader's guide, has served as the coordinator for interfaith relations for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) since September 2003. From 1987–2003, he was a mission co-worker of the church, assigned to the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., where he also directed the interfaith office. Jay worked in global education in the West Coast office of Church World Service from 1980–1987, and in pastoral ministry in churches in northern California from 1973–1979. Educated at Duke University (B.A.) and San Francisco Theological Seminary (M.A. and M.Div.), Jay earned a Ph.D. in the history of religions from the Graduate Theological Union. He is married to Judith Rock, who has been a dancer, a choreographer, and a teacher in the field of theology and art, and is now working as a writer.



Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

Donald K. McKim
Editor

To the Leader

This study aims to engage participants in learning about Islam and in thinking about the distinctive ideas and practices of Christianity. Each session is built around a question that Muslims often ask about Christianity and provides material for participants to come to a beginning understanding of the Islamic views and affirmations that lie behind the question. However, the focus of each session is to help participants come to a clearer and more articulate understanding of their own faith and practice as Christians.

To talk with Muslims, as with women and men of other religious traditions, Reformed Christians need to be able to talk openly and with some comfort about their own faith and way of living as Christians. While it is possible to learn to do this by trial and error, in the give and take of conversation, these sessions offer a way to prepare for talking about our religious lives with Muslims. Trial and error will still be part of entering into this dialogue, but participants in this study will be better equipped to listen and to talk with their Muslim neighbors.

Like Christians, Muslims are a diverse group. They may be liberals, moderates, or fundamentalists; peacekeepers or soldiers; Shia or Sunni in orientation; wealthy or poor; scholars or illiterates; clerics or common folk who blend the teachings of Islam with elements of their culture of origin. This study guide is brief, and provides only a rudimentary introduction to Islam.

This study is not intended as a guide to conducting a Christian-Muslim dialogue. A good deal of trust is required between Christian and Muslim partners before having honest and probing conversations such as the ones imagined here. It is possible, and necessary, to talk about the points of distinction and divergence between our religions, in order for us to develop depth of understanding. To nurture a Christian-Muslim relationship, it is better to begin by discussing less divisive and emotional issues. (See “Getting Started in Interfaith Relations” and other resources at pcusa.org/interfaith/toolkit/starter.htm.)

See Session 4 for an optional activity: Watch the film *The Message* (1976, PG; starring Anthony Quinn), a film about the beginnings of Islam. You will need to secure the DVD and viewing equipment.

An optional visit to a mosque is recommended prior to Session 5. Another option for Session 5 is to invite a Muslim person to speak to your group. Both of these options will require preparation.

Worship One God

Scripture

Deuteronomy 6:4; John 15:10–12

Main Idea

Both Muslims and Christians affirm that God is one. This understanding of God is fundamental to Islam, which teaches that God is unique, unparalleled, and not to be confused or “associated” with other beings. Christianity also conceives of God as one, but the very nature of God is understood to be relational. For Christians, God’s very being is found in the intimate communion of the three persons of the Trinity.

Teaching Points

The session invites learners to consider:

1. Muslims do not accept the Christian understanding of Jesus as God incarnate or the idea of God as Trinity.
2. Christians believe that God as Trinity is in nature not many gods, but one God who is relational in essence.
3. The unity and fellowship of the Trinity reveals what it means to be created in the image of God.

Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant’s Book

“Test Your Perceptions” (on the inside back cover of the Participant’s Book)

Nicene Creed

Newsprint, markers

Paper, pens

Leader Prep

Use the following information to begin your preparation to lead the study group:

Islam, which means “peace, security and wholeness through total submission to God’s will,” is the name of the religion that began around 610 C.E. with a series of divine revelations given to the Prophet Muhammad, which became known as the Qur’an (Al-Qur’an al-Karim, Kalam-Allah—the speech of God). Islam received its greatest momentum, however, from the Hijrah (HEEJ-rah) in 622 C.E. when Muhammad fled Mecca to Medina, where the Muslim community was established. For this reason, 622 C.E. is the year 0 in the Muslim calendar.¹

Read Session 1 of the participant’s book carefully, paying close attention to the similarities and differences between Muslim and Christian ideas about God. Look up and read the two Scripture passages, along with the verses before and after what is suggested, to understand them more fully.

Become familiar with the “Test Your Perceptions” questions and answers, and the *Nicene Creed*.

If you decide to do so, identify participants to summarize the Muslim and Christian points in the session’s discussion of God.

Have the questions for individual “heart” reflection ready to post or distribute. Most importantly, think about what you will do and say to create an environment in which participants will feel safe to talk about what they want to learn about Islam, as well as to share what they do and do not understand about Christian faith and life.

Leading the Session

Gather

- Unless all participants know one another, invite them to introduce themselves by name. Consider asking someone to provide refreshments.
- Begin the session with a prayer for understanding and/or a hymn such as “Be Thou My Vision” or “How Great Thou Art.”

Head

- Ask participants the questions from “Test Your Perceptions” (on the inside back cover of the participant’s book). When the group has answered the questions, read the answers (inside back cover of leader’s guide).
- Ask: *What do you most want to learn about Islam?* Jot down the key questions for later reference.
- Divide the group into two sections, and invite participants to take five minutes to read “Reflection: God Is One” in the participant’s book. Ask one group to focus on the Muslim idea of God and the second group to focus on the Christian understanding of God. Allow ten minutes for small-group discussion. Ask one person from each group to be ready to present the main points of the discussion. As the two groups regather and share, ask participants to jot down what remains unclear to them. Collect these questions.

Heart

- Read aloud the passages from Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:4; John 15:10–12. Invite each person to reflect silently on God as one and God as triune. In particular, ask participants to think about the Christian emphasis on having an intimate relationship with God.
- Ask: *What is more important to you—having an intimate relationship with God or revering the sovereign creator of the universe?*
- Share these two questions for reflection: *How can we find a healthy balance between fear of God and love of God? How might the way Muslims exalt Allah inform our awe of and obedience to God?*
- *Option:* Ask participants to write down their responses to these questions for themselves as the beginning of keeping a “journal” during this study. This can also be done at home.

Hands

- Recall Rahilah and Ali’s question about the Trinity: Do you believe in one God or three?
- Ask: *How would you explain your understanding of God to Rahilah and Ali? What words would you use to explain what the Trinity means to you? What questions do you still have about the Trinity?*
- Ms. Perkins writes, “We believe, as Augustine observed, that the very essence of God is relational, and therefore the Trinity highlights one of the differences between the Christian and Muslim understandings of God.” Ask: *Is this notion of the relational aspect of the essence of God clear to you? Does it make sense? Is it an important part of your personal faith? What difference does it make in the way you live your life?*

Depart

- Close the session with prayer and then recite the ancient *Nicene Creed* in unison. (You can find the *Nicene Creed* online, on page 15 of the *Presbyterian Hymnal*, and in the *Book of Confessions*.)
- As participants leave, remind them to read the next session and to do the observation exercise in the participant’s book.

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Worship One God

Scripture

Deuteronomy 6:4 In this, their essential prayer, the *Shema*, Jews of ancient Israel and of today confess their worship of “the LORD alone.”

John 15:10–12 Jesus speaks about his commandment that the disciples “love one another.”

Prayer

O God, you created us all. Help us to worship you. Help us to praise you and follow your will. You are the creator and we are your servants. You are merciful and compassionate. Help us to honor you. Help us to show your mercy to others. Give us compassionate hearts to extend your love to others. Help us to know who you are, and who you want us to be as your people. May our lives reflect your goodness. Open us to ways of expressing faith in you as we seek to be your servants. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Setting the Scene

“It’s nice to see you again,” Rahilah says, smiling warmly. Her hijab (or head scarf) is beige with green diamonds and she is wearing a matching beige pantsuit. Ali stands up to shake your hand; he is dressed no differently from you or me.

“Thanks for the coffee,” you answer, sliding into the booth across from them. They have already ordered you a latté, knowing it’s your favorite. The hospitality and generosity has grown between the three of you. Because you like the two of them so much, you’re thrilled that your friendship is growing as you continue conversations about faith. You sip your latté as you anticipate another opportunity to enter into their world and hear their questions, even as they are entering into your world and listening to your questions.

“We have a difficult question to ask today,” Ali says shyly.

“Bring it on,” you say, feeling ready for anything.

“We’re going to be frank with you, my friend,” Ali begins. “We Muslims believe in one God, the almighty Allah. To worship any other god would be blasphemy.”

“Why do Christians talk about three gods?” Rahilah asks.

Your heart sinks. Oh, no! They’re talking about one of the deepest mysteries of the faith, one of the hardest to explain even to another Christian—the Trinity.

“What do you mean ‘three gods?’” you ask, wanting to be sure they are really asking about the Trinity.

Ali responds, “You call the great Allah ‘Father.’ You actually believe he had a son, which is amazing to us. How can Jesus, who was a great prophet, and a human being, be the Son of God? The very idea that Jesus could be God in human form is distasteful and dishonors God’s sovereign holiness.”

Rahilah chimes in: “Not only that, but I hear that Christians worship a god called the ‘holy spirit.’ I thought your Bible commands you to worship no other god except Allah. Why do you disobey Allah like this?”

Key Question: Do you believe in one God or three?

Reflection: God Is One

To Muslims, the idea of God taking human form is offensive. The Qur’an takes a strong stand against the Christian doctrine of incarnation. Muslims believe that Jesus (or Isa) lived and they highly esteem him as a prophet, but they consider it blasphemous for Christians to view Isa as equal with God.

Similarly, many Muslims cite the Christian belief in the Holy Spirit as yet another example of our confusion about God. The term “Holy Spirit” is briefly mentioned in the Qur’an, but Muslims interpret it as either the “angel Gabriel” or “spiritual power.” The Qur’an is explicit when it comes to rejecting the Trinity:

O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion: Nor say of Allah aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) a messenger of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in Allah and His messengers. Say not “Trinity”: desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is one Allah: Glory be to Him: (far exalted is He) above having a son. To Him belong all things in the heavens and on earth. And enough is Allah as a Disposer of affairs.¹

1. Qur’an 4:171, Yusufali translation.

Certainly, the Christian belief in the Trinity creates problems for dialogue between Christians and Muslims. The oneness of God is a nonnegotiable for Muslims like Rahilah and Ali. The first and greatest teaching of Islam is found in a saying they call the *Shahadah*: “*La ilaha illa-llah, Muhammadan Rasulu-llah,*” which is to say: “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.” (These are the words that one confesses when converting to Islam.)

The idea of God as one is called *Tawhid* in Arabic, and the opposite of it is denoted by the word *Shirk* (polytheism), which conveys the notion “partnership.” The related term *mushrik* is applied to someone guilty of polytheistic association.

Two tenets are foundational to all Christians: the Trinity and the Incarnation. That is to say, we believe in one God who is known to us as Father, Son, and Spirit. And we believe that God came and lived on earth in the person of Jesus Christ. Since both of these beliefs offend the Muslim’s view of God, how can we talk to one another about God? Where will we find a point of convergence?

Perhaps a good place to begin talking about God together is found in some of our common metaphors for God. The Qur’an describes human relationship with God in terms of a master and a servant, yet at the same time describes Allah as merciful and compassionate to humans. Christians can affirm this view of God because there are also examples in our Scriptures in which God is described as a merciful and compassionate master (e.g., Neh. 9:31; Jer. 3:12; Dan. 9:9; Ps. 86:15 and 111:4; Luke 12:35–48; Rom. 7:21—8:6; Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1). Even Jesus is said to have taken the form of a slave in obedience to God (Phil. 2:5–11).

Most important, however, is that Christianity, like Islam and Judaism, is monotheistic: “The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut. 6:4–5). Jesus, speaking more than a thousand years after Moses, affirmed this as one of the two greatest commandments given to humanity (Mark 12:28–30; Matt. 22:37). To us, Father, Son, and Spirit are not partners or colleagues within a committee called “God.” Father, Son, and Spirit are one in substance. St. Augustine proposes that a God who is love must be triune in nature, since love always involves a lover, the beloved, and the spirit of love between them.² We worship a God

2. Gareth B. Matthews, ed., *Augustine: On the Trinity Books 8–15* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Book 8, paragraph 10.

whose very being is an intimate relationship—a communion between Father, Son, and Spirit so closely knit that we can conceive only of God as one.

Exploring the Word

God is love; not *love* as a noun, but as an active verb. Jesus extends an invitation to the church, asking us to join this act of love:

I am in the Father and the Father is in me And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth . . . You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. . . . On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (John 14:10–20).

What a mysterious mixture of intimate relationships—Jesus in the Father, his Spirit in us, the church in Jesus. The church is not divine, by any means, but we are swept off our feet into a love relationship with the divine, an intimacy mirrored in the triune nature of God. The unity and fellowship of the Trinity models the unity and fellowship the Church universal seeks to imitate in living together as the one body of Christ.

Since the Bible never actually mentions the word *Trinity*, Christians are often hard-pressed to explain its origins. Again, we rely on the Holy Spirit working through church leaders who searched the Scriptures diligently and prayerfully. They found Scriptures about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit throughout the Old and New Testaments, just as we can when we search through Scripture ourselves. Jesus made the most explicit reference to the Trinity when he commanded us to baptize believers “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19).³

What the Church Confesses

The *Nicene Creed* was written to affirm the Trinitarian nature of God and to acknowledge the belief in one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is the Church’s strongest statement of belief in the eternal coexistence of the Father and Son: “We believe . . . in

3. Other scriptural references that are helpful to the discussion of one God in three persons include the following: Deut. 6:4; Isa. 44:6; 45:21–22; Ps. 45:6; Jer. 10:10; Matt. 3:16–17; John 1:1; John 17:3; Acts 5:3–4; Rom. 9:5; 1 Cor. 8:4–6; 2 Cor. 13:13; Col. 2:9; 1 Thess. 1:9; 1 Pet. 1:2, 1 John 5:20; Jude 1:24–25.

one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.”

Initially the creed was drafted to counter a widening rift within the church over the relationship between the Father and the Son. Emperor Constantine convened a council in Nicaea in A.D. 325 so that church leaders would come to some agreement over their language about God. The proposal was adopted and signed by a majority of the bishops. In A.D. 381, a second council met in Constantinople. It adopted a revised and expanded form of the A.D. 325 creed, now known as the *Nicene Creed*.

We may wonder if doctrines as complex as the Trinity could really have any bearing on our everyday lives. One subtle yet relevant impact of the Trinity is the implication it holds for understanding what it means to be created in God’s image. We believe, as Augustine observed, that the very essence of God is relational, and therefore the Trinity highlights one of the differences between the Christian and Muslim understandings of God. In Islam, God’s oneness reveals a God who is self-sufficient. In Christianity, God’s oneness reveals a God whose very essence is relational. That relational essence is made known in the Trinity. The *Study Catechism* explains it this way:

Question 17. What does our creation in God’s image reflect about God’s reality?

Our being created in and for relationship is a reflection of the Holy Trinity. In the mystery of the one God, the three divine persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—live in, with, and for one another eternally in perfect love and freedom.

—*Study Catechism: Full Version*

Spiritual Practice

Read Deuteronomy 6:4 and John 14:9–21. Then reflect on Rahilah and Ali’s question about the Trinity. How would you explain your understanding of God, and what the Trinity means to you?

Questions for Reflection

What common misperceptions do you hear when it comes to the Christian idea of the Trinity? What Christian language and/or traditions contribute to these misconceptions? What have you heard that is helpful?

Remember the ever-present guy at televised sporting events carrying that John 3:16 sign? It's a central text to our belief in God's salvation through Christ, but the notion of Jesus as the "Son of God" is anathema to Muslims. Should we stop emphasizing Jesus' identity as the Son of God around Muslims to avoid offending them? Why or why not?

Because of the Christian emphasis on an intimate relationship with God, we can sometimes treat God as a "pal" instead of as our Lord. How can we find a healthy balance between fearing God and loving God? How could the way Muslims exalt Allah inform our own awe of, and obedience to, God?

An Exercise in Observation for Session 2

During church this coming Sunday, try to listen to the songs, Scripture, prayers, and sermon as though you were a Muslim. Take notes during the service. As best you can, imagine and observe the elements, words, or practices that you think might confuse a Muslim visitor. What, if anything, could a Muslim visitor accept as a shared truth? What might be offensive to a Muslim? Be ready to share your observations with the group during your next session.
