

THE
Episcopal
CHURCH



**Christian-Muslim Relations:
Theological and Practical Guidance for The Episcopal Church
(2021)**

Since 1979, General Convention has passed resolutions recognizing the vitality of Islam and endorsing substantive dialogue between Episcopalians and Muslims on theological and humanitarian matters. During this same period, The Episcopal Church has commended, encouraged, and supported Christian-Muslim dialogues facilitated by the National and World Councils of Churches. Efforts at deep consideration of Episcopal-Muslim concerns have been informed by the notion that interreligious conversation and collaboration may and should be pursued, not only ecumenically and at the churchwide level, but at the local level as well. The following points are, therefore, offered as guidance to Episcopalians generally and are commended for use by dioceses or parishes who wish to begin or to revitalize dialogue or collaboration with their Muslim neighbors.

1. **The authenticity of openheartedness.** Our guidance begins with affirmation that openheartedness toward (thus positive relationship with) Islam and Muslims accords with our Baptismal Covenant promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons and to strive for justice and peace among all people.
2. **The matter of names.** “Islam” is itself the Arabic word for “submission.” When pronouncing “Islam”, the accent is on the second syllable. Things mandated, influenced, or inspired by Islam may be termed “Islamic.” An adherent of this religion is a Muslim. When used as an adjective, “Muslim” indicates something done by (or having to do with) a person who embraces “Islam”—the religion. In some publications, “Muslim” is rendered “Moslem.” In fact, a survey of English-language materials about Islam will reveal that many terms have more than one spelling. Why such variants? Arabic, the sacred language of Islam, uses an alphabet consisting of consonants only. Some have no direct equivalent in the Latin alphabet. The process of transliteration (conversion of words from Arabic script to Latin letters) leaves room for multiple spelling possibilities.
3. **The reality of Islam’s complexity.** Worldwide, one in every five persons identifies as Muslim. Consider, therefore, the following points:
 - a. Diversity among Muslims results from factors such as nationality, ethnicity, native language, geographic location, social status, gender, economic status, attitudes toward modernity, sectarian lines, the legal tradition they embrace, their attitudes toward various

facets of global politics, and many other factors. Therefore, generalizations about Islam and Muslims are likely to be inaccurate with respect to some significant cohort of Muslims somewhere, so should be avoided.

- b. Through immigration and commerce, Muslims, in all their diversity, have transported (and continue to transport) Islam to every locale in which The Episcopal Church is present. Muslims, like Christians, are not monolithic in their attitudes, experiences, and priorities.
 - c. While what is held in common exceeds the differences, there are important distinctions between Sunni and Shi'a Islam regarding Islam's early history and the transfer of authority after the death of the Prophet, certain theological matters, certain worship practices, and the foundations of jurisprudence. In sectarian terms, some 85% of all Muslims are Sunni. Some 10% are Shi'a. The remaining 5% may belong to some other sects or movements. (Regarding African American Muslims, most are Sunni, a few are Shi'a, and some belong to movements such as the Nation of Islam.) Some simply say, "We are Muslims," and refuse to use sectarian labels.
 - d. "The Muslim World" is an oft-used but not-always-helpful construct. When used by non-Muslims, it implies a place/a group of people "out there" or "over there"—whereas, in almost every diocese of The Episcopal Church, Muslims have been a significant presence for two generations or more—in fact, for more than (in some cases, much more than) two centuries. The binary "the Muslim World versus the West" is rarely accurate. Speaking of "Muslim-majority" countries or regions is often more appropriate.
4. **Essentials of Islam.** Given the complexity of Islam, essentializing is best avoided. Yet, sources for basic information on Islamic history, beliefs, and practices still have their place. Among the many fine sources for such information, see Amir Hussain, *Oil & Water: Two Faiths, One God* (Kelowna, BC: CopperHouse, 2006), which provides a Muslim scholar's concise introduction to Islam and Christian-Muslim understanding. For an in-depth introduction to Islam, see Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1994). Here follow brief reflections on basic matters about which Christians often have questions:
- a. **Naming God.** *Allah* is Arabic for "God." It is the primary name of God for all Muslims. Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews also call God "Allah." When speaking or writing in a language other than Arabic, many Muslims translate "Allah" to that language's name for "God" in written and spoken discourse. God is said to have ninety-nine names—the most prominent of which are al-Rahman and al-Rahim (the Compassionate, the Merciful).
 - b. **Qur'an.** The Qur'an (sometimes spelled "Koran"), is Islam's holy book. Muslims believe it to be God's speech, transmitted in Arabic through the Prophet Muhammad over a twenty-two-year period. Its length is similar to the New Testament. It contains 114 suras (chapters). Its first sura/chapter (the Fatiha; the Opener), consisting of seven verses, is the core element of Muslim ritual prayer. The second chapter has 286 verses. The remaining chapters are progressively shorter (in most cases). Since it is not

organized thematically, attempting to read the Qur'an from beginning to end is problematic as a first approach. Consider, instead, following a reading plan offered by a good textbook. Unless one knows Arabic, it is best to use at least two translations when exploring the Qur'an. The translation by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford University Press) and *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (Harper Collins)—prepared by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and a team of editors—are highly regarded. Be aware that, second in authority to the Qur'an is a large body of literature known as the Hadith (report; tradition): records of sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad (his Sunna/his example).

- c. **Biblical figures in the Qur'an.** The Qur'an mentions the stories of Adam, Abraham, Moses, Joseph, and a number of other biblical personalities—Jesus and Mary among them! Christians may be surprised to learn that Jesus and his mother are major figures in Islam. In fact, “Maryam” (Mary) is the name of the nineteenth sura/chapter of the Qur'an.
- d. **Worship.** Islam calls for the five-times-daily performance of *salat*—a brief prayer ritual with fixed texts and a set pattern of prostration and other postures. Muslims may perform *salat* more than five times daily. They may also offer supplication (*dua*) in simple or elaborate forms; they may, as well, honor the divine by chanting one or more of God's Names (a practice called *dhikr* or *zikr*; literally, remembrance). All of this may be done at home or in a *masjid* (place of prostration; mosque).
- e. **Holidays.** It is appropriate for Episcopalians to wish Muslim neighbors well on Islamic holidays. Islam employs a non-adjusting lunar calendar. Thus, in relation to the solar calendar, Islam's months and holidays fall some eleven days earlier each year. A new day (hence a new month) begins at sundown. Depending on their sectarian or cultural identity, some Muslims celebrate holidays that are ignored by other Muslims. However, Muslims the world around observe two principal festivals. *Eid al-Fitr* (the Festival of Fast-Breaking) marks the end of the month of Ramadan (a period of obligatory fasting during daylight hours). *Eid al-Adha* (pronounced *eed al-ahd-hah*; the Feast of Sacrifice) begins on the tenth day of the month in which Hajj (pilgrimage) is made to Mecca, about two-and-a-half months after *Eid al-Fitr*, and extends over four days. It is associated with Abraham's willingness to fulfill God's request to sacrifice his son. Since God substituted a ram for Abraham's son, Muslims who have the means are expected to sacrifice rams (or other unblemished male animals—goats, bulls, camels) on this holiday; or, they may purchase, or contribute toward the purchase of, an animal, which is slaughtered professionally. The meat becomes the centerpiece of the holiday meal shared with family and friends; it is also distributed to the poor worldwide, making this holiday a huge event of outreach and address of world-hunger issues.
- f. **Shari'ah.** Literally, *shari'ah* means the “broad path”—particularly, a path that leads to water. Although the word *sharī'ah* is usually translated “Islamic law,” this is a misnomer. Different from European and American legal systems, *shari'ah* is God-given comprehensive guidance, touching on all aspects of life and reflecting Islam's proclamation of God's intimate concern for justice between human beings. Often, when mention is made of *shari'ah* or Islamic Law in non-Muslim sources, it would be more

appropriate to have spoken of *fiqh* (jurisprudence). Many (but certainly not all) Sunni Muslims subscribe to one of the four canonical “schools” of legal reasoning. Shi‘a Muslims have their own. Typically, popular secular media speak of *shari‘ah* as something negative only. Episcopalians can work with their Muslim neighbors to lift up examples of *shari‘ah* as *ihsan*—the doing of the beautiful.

- g. **Jihad.** The noun *jihad* means “struggle.” While it does sometimes refer to armed struggle on behalf of the faith, translating *jihad* as “holy war” is misleading. It comes from a linguistic root meaning “to endeavor, to strive, to labor.” Hence, it also names one’s own effort to better one’s relationship with God. (In this sense it could be translated as “spiritual discipline”). It is also a popular given-name for Arab Christians and Muslims alike.
 - h. **Hijab.** The root meaning of *hijab* refers to guarding one’s modesty—something Islam requires of men and women alike. In The Episcopal Church’s various locales, some Muslims wear what they believe to be “Islamic” clothing; others dress according to local norms. In many cases, *hijab* is synonymous with “headscarf”—which some Muslim women never wear (except, possibly, when praying). Among Muslim women who do wear a headscarf at all times when in public are a few who accompany it with a *niqab* (face covering). Avoid the assumption that Muslim women who wear a head-covering are oppressed in some way; in fact, some who choose to do so feel empowered by it. Whatever their practice in public, Muslim women cover their hair when in a mosque. Christian women who visit a mosque for any purpose should bring and wear a headscarf as a sign of respect to the host community.
 - i. **Labeling animus.** When speaking and writing of blatant, virulent, aggressive, promotion of negativity about Islam and Muslims, consider avoiding the term “Islamophobia”—which, literally, means “fear of Islam.” Rather, consider calling it “anti-Muslim bigotry”—a far more accurate description. Whatever its label, such speech promotes attitudes and overt behavior contrary to our Baptismal Covenant promises to strive for justice and peace among all people, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.
5. **Dialogue and Collaboration.** Given the commitments made through our Baptismal Covenant, theologizing dialogically and making common cause with our Muslim neighbors are indeed acts of faithfulness.
- a. **Know your dialogue partners.** Are they lifelong Muslims or recent converts? Are they native-born or immigrants? If the former, are they African American or some other ethnicity? If the latter, are they first-generation or second? What cultural and political particularities from their homeland might come with them to the conversation? Again, keep in mind that Muslims differ among themselves on a plethora of issues.
 - b. **Anticipate gender segregation.** When addressing religious matters, Muslim dialogue partners will most likely be men. Gatherings organized by Muslims, especially those held in local mosques, often exhibit more gender segregation than Episcopalians typically practice, not only in the prayer area, but also in places of socializing, dining, and

fellowship. Be aware that, for the most part, Muslim communities have not worked through issues of LGBTQ inclusion, hence may differ from Episcopalians on understandings or policies. LGBTQ Episcopalians in dialogue with Muslims need to be aware of this reality and handle it diplomatically.

- c. **Be aware of the Islamic clock.** When planning events with members of the Muslim community, take note of the times of daily prayer and accommodate them in the event schedule.
- d. **Be aware of the Islamic calendar.** When planning interfaith events, take note of the dates of the two *Eids* and avoid scheduling interfaith events on those days. Take note also of the dates for Ramadan. Most Muslims are particularly busy during that month and their day is very much focused around when the fast can be broken. If an interfaith event is planned during Ramadan, avoid a focus on food during the hours of fasting. Be aware that, on every evening of Ramadan, *iftar* (fast-breaking) is a special time—and many Muslims are eager to include neighbors and friends in the feasting that follows. Episcopalians who are invited to an *iftar* might take a small gift of nuts, dried fruits, or sweets.

6. Making common cause. While our understandings of salvation history differ considerably, Episcopalians and Muslims can participate collaboratively in God’s mission in three traditional ways: mitigating human need, challenging structural injustice, and caring for creation. The Islamic principle of *ihsan* (doing the beautiful; defined by tradition as behaving as though one can see God because, without doubt, one is *seen by* God) offers a basis on which Christians may join with Muslims in loving service to God, ecological stewardship, and concerted effort toward the public good. This collection of guideposts is meant as a starting-point.

7. Resources for deepening understanding. The publications of the *Building Bridges Seminar*, a dialogue of Christian and Muslim scholars initiated by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 2002 and stewarded by Georgetown University since 2012, are useful for Episcopalians interested in dialogical close reading of scripture and comparative exploration of theological and sociological themes. See <https://buildingbridges.georgetown.edu/>. Recommendations for print and AV resources about Islam or Christian-Muslim engagement are available from the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations.