Faith and Society Files: Encountering Muslims

In this document, author Paul Weller provides background information about Muslim beliefs and practices to aid dialogue.

Introducing people of different religions or beliefs

As set out in the resource on the ***Religion or Belief Landscape of the UK***, (downloadable from www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/516106/Religion_or_Belief.aspx) Baptist Christians in the UK are likely to encounter people of various religion and belief traditions in a whole variety of ways and contexts. This can include at school/college/university; in work; in leisure contexts, in public settings; and when visiting places of worship.

We have produced a series of resources that aim to provide a brief introductory overview to people of other than Christian religions or beliefs. Just as Christians can understandably become uncomfortable and even distressed when words and concepts central to our understanding of Christianity are misused or misunderstood, so also can others be concerned when the words that they use are ignorantly misused or are replaced by other words that are not part of their traditions.

Even though this is rapidly changing, Christians in the UK have the relative advantage that many key Christian words and concepts have, over the centuries, entered into the English language. By contrast, many of the key words and concepts used by people of other than Christian traditions to signify things of importance to them can seem unfamiliar and perhaps, initially, off-putting. Using the terms that people use about themselves (and which, within these resources are signaled by the word or words concerned *appearing in italics*), we are respecting how our neighbours understand themselves and showing our readiness to learn how others describe themselves, their beliefs and practices.

Muslim Individuals, Communities and Organisations

Encountering Individual Muslims

There are a number of popular images of Muslim men as having beards and Muslim women wearing head coverings. While some of these images correspond to norms in particular cultural and religious groups found among Muslims, there is no general visual way in which one would always know that one was encountering an individual Muslim.

It is more likely that, as one gets to know an individual, one may come to understand that they are Muslim through either what they say – for example, '*Insh'Allah*' (if God wills it); or through what they do, such as observing a regular discipline of prayer during the course of a day, or undertaking a fast in the Muslim month of *Ramadan* (see further below).

Encountering Muslim Communities

The largest groups of the Muslims in the UK have ancestral origins in the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent. The vast majority of the remaining Muslim populations in the UK have national origins in continents and regions such as Africa and the Balkans and countries such as Cyprus, Malaysia, Turkey, Iran and the Arab world. There are also growing numbers of indigenous Britons who have embraced Islam. When encountering Muslims in communities, groups, and organisations, one is likely to come across a wide religious, as well as cultural and ethnic, diversity.

Sunni Muslims

90% of the world's Muslims are *Sunnis* and *Sunnis* of South Asian origins form the majority of the Muslim population in the UK. The name *Sunni* relates to the '*sunna*' of Islamic law. '*Sunnis*' see themselves as ones who 'adhere to the sunna'. Among Sunni Muslims four recognised *madhahib* or *madhhabs* (schools of law for applying the common *usul al-fiqh* or principles of Islamic jurisprudence) can be found. These recognise each another as authentically Islamic. They are:

1 The *Hanafi*, which predominates in India and the majority of the former Ottoman Empire, and can also be found in Egypt.
2 The *Maliki* predominates in West Africa and the Arab West, and can also be found in Egypt.
3 The *Shafi`i* predominates in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, and is also important in Egypt.
4 The *Hanbali* is found in Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

There are also a number of groups and movements, each with their own particular emphases, although those who identify primarily with one or another tendency may also relate to others. Among Muslims with connection to South Asian origins these groups and movements include:

1 Barelwis
2 *Deobandis*
3 *Tablighi Jamaat*
4 *Ahl-i-Hadith*
5 *Jamaat-i-Islami*

Shi'a Muslims

The *Shi'a* tradition emerged from those early Muslims who disputed the majority's decision to appoint Abu Bakr as the Prophet Muhammad's successor as *Caliph*, or ruler, and advocated instead for the appointment 'Ali ibn Abi Talib.

The word '*Shi'ite*' comes from '*shiat 'Ali*', meaning "the follower of 'Ali'. A series of disputes and wars developed until Husayn, who tried to lead a revolt to reinstate what he saw as the legitimacy of the *Caliphate*, was killed by the armies of the Caliph Yazid in the Battle of Karbala.

Husayn is seen by the Shi'a as a model in the struggle against injustice with his death informing the distinctive motifs of suffering and persecution found in the *Shi'a* tradition. The descendants of `Ali are seen as having special leadership roles as *Imams* (to be distinguished from *imams* spelled with a lower case 'i', who are generally those who lead Muslim prayers) or *Hujjah* (Proofs of God) and who are believed to be chosen by God to interpret the Qur`an and guide the community. The *Shi`a* tradition also includes a number of schools, based on differences concerning the succession of Imams following Ali.

1 *Twelvers* (or *`Ithna Asherites*) are the majority and believe in a succession of twelve *Imams*, the last of whom is believed to be still alive, although last seen in 873CE. He is thought to be waiting to appear as the *Mahdi* (Guided One).
2 The *Seveners* or *Ismailis* affirm the *Imamship* of sixth *Imam's* eldest son. They include the *Agha Khanis* or *Nizaris*, who understand the *Aga Khan* to be their living *Imam* who will be succeeded by a member of his family.

Tasawwuf and Muslims

Tasawwuf or *Sufism* is the mystical strand of Islam with which both some *Sunni* and *Shi'ia* Muslims identify. It is thought to derive from the Arabic word '*suf*', meaning wool. *Sufism* emphasises the inner aspects of Islam and finds organisational expression in a range of Sufi Orders, each of which are led by *shaykhs* or *pirs* and are linked by lines of spiritual initiation known as *sisilahs*. These Orders include the:
1 *Naqshbandi*
2 *Chishti*
3 *Suhrawardi*

Muslim Places of Worship

The Masjid or Mosque

The English word mosque is derived from the Arabic word *masjid*, which means a place of prostration. While increasingly there are purpose-built mosques that display distinctively Muslim architectural features, there are still many mosques that were in buildings that formerly were private residences or were public buildings such as warehouses or, occasionally, Christian churches. Although every mosque is, in principle, open to all Muslims, in practice individual mosques may reflect specific different Muslim religious tendencies and/or national or regional groupings.

Images, paintings or decorations which represent living beings are not generally found inside mosques. In some mosques, Arabic calligraphy may be observed on the walls and perhaps some geometrical patterns. There are generally no seats but the floor is carpeted. Music is not played although some mosques may have congregational chanting. A minbar (pulpit or raised steps) stands to one side of the *mihrab* (which points the direction of Mecca) and from this the *imam* delivers sermons on Fridays and at festival times.

Mosques provide a number of services like the channelling of *Zakat* (see below) to the poor and offering educational facilities and instruction in Arabic and in community mother-tongue languages, as appropriate. In addition, many mosques are now registered for the solemnisation of marriages, and some mosques have installed morgues ensuring that Muslims can perform Islamic burial rites.

Prayers in the Mosque

Attendance at the mosque to pray during the five daily prayers: *salah* (Arabic) or *namaz* (Persian/Urdu), is not obligatory for Muslim women and this can vary both according to the Muslim culture and tradition concerned, as well as in relation to the specific local mosque. Muslim women are in any case expected not to come to the mosque during their menstrual period, and in practice, many mosques do not cater for their attendance. In some cases women are discouraged from worshipping in mosques and are only expected to attend for cultural events and special occasions. Where provision is made for women to pray at the same time as men they often enter the prayer hall by separate entrances and usually sit separately and sometimes in an upstairs room, although in some mosques women worship behind the men on the same floor, separated by a screen.

Visiting a Masjid / Mosque

Before entering the prayer hall or prayer room in order to pray, Muslim men and women will have performed *wudu* or ablutions if they had not already done so earlier. This is not necessary for the non-Muslim visitor who will not be joining in the prayer. On entering the prayer hall of the mosque, visitors should enter quietly and sit on the floor. If arriving when one of the daily prayers is in progress, non-Muslim visitors are generally welcome to observe. At such a time, one could find a place near the rear or side walls and sit or stand quietly observing the prayer. No sacred or blessed food will be offered and, other than removing their shoes and acting respectfully in the prayer hall, visitors are not expected to make any physical gesture of respect to holy objects.

When visiting a mosque, clothing should be modest for both men and women. For women this generally means loose fitting and non-transparent ankle length skirts or trousers, together with a long sleeved and high necked top. A headscarf is usually essential for women. For both women and men, shoes are removed before going into the prayer hall and put on the racks provided. Clean and presentable socks, stockings, or tights are therefore a good idea.

Visitors may be greeted by the Arabic greeting "*Assalaam-u-'alaikum*" which means 'Peace be upon you'. The answer, if the visitor would like to use it, is "*Wa 'alaikum-us-salaam*", or 'Peace be upon you too'. Generally speaking, visitors should not offer, or expect, to shake hands with people of the opposite sex.

Origins of Islam

Over a period of twenty three years, from the age of forty, the Prophet Muhammad (570-632CE) is believed by Muslims to have received a series of revelations from God through the Angel Jibreel (Gabriel).

The founding event of the Muslim community or *'Ummah*, was Muhammad's 622CE five hundred kilometer migration, or *Hijra*, from Makka in Arabia to Madina. This marks the beginning of the Muslim dating system, 'AH' (after *Hijra*).

Islam is believed to be based on revealed truth, but the revelations received through Muhammad are not seen by Muslims as instituting a new faith. Rather, Muslims affirm belief in the *Torah* of Moses and the *Injil*, or Gospel, of Jesus and Muhammad is seen as the 'seal' of the prophetic succession, bringing a revelation in Arabic which both called people back to the original teachings of the previous prophets and fulfilled them. The core of Islam is seen as being 'submission' to God. Islam has seven fundamental beliefs, as follows:

1 the oneness of God
2 the books revealed by God
3 the prophets
4 the angels
5 the Day of Judgement
6 life after death
7 the omnipotence of God

The Qur'an

The book of the Qur'an is seen as a 'miracle' and 'sign' of God, containing the actual words of God. As the language in which it was revealed, Arabic is seen as very important for understanding its real meaning.

The opening '*surah*' or chapter of the Qur'an, called the Fatiha summarises Islam and reads: 'In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Praise to God, Lord of the Worlds, the Merciful, the Compassionate, King of the Day of Judgement. You alone we worship, you alone we beseech. Lead us in the straight path, the path of those upon whom is your grace, not of those upon whom is your wrath, nor of those who have gone astray.'

Shari'ah

The *Shari'ah* (law) offers an integrated source of guidance for the daily life of Muslims. Together with the *Qur'an*, it has three other sources:

1 The *Sunna* as model example of the Prophet's life.
2 The *Hadith*, which are collections of recognised traditions recording Muhammad's words and actions, together with those of his companions.
3 *Ijma*, which is the process of attaining consensus in relation to the interpretation and application of *Shari'ah* where it might otherwise be unclear.
4 *Ijtihad* (the *Sunni* term) or *'Aql* (the *Shi'a* term) which refers to the use of reason. One form of this is *Qiyas*, or analogy. However, many *Sunni* Muslims argue that, in the tenth century CE, 'the gates of *ijtihad*' became closed.

The 'Five Pillars' of Islam

The essentials of Muslim practice are known as the 'Five Pillars of Islam'. They are:

1 *Shahadah*, the declaration that there is no god except God and that Muhammad is his messenger.

2 *Salat*, which is prescribed prayer conducted five times daily. These are:
- *Fajr*, at dawn
- *Zuhr*, at midday
- *Asr*, in the afternoon
- *Maghrib*, after sunset
- *Isha*, in the night

3 *Zakat*, which is a contribution to the needy consisting of two and a half per cent of the total of an individual's annual income and savings (an additional contribution, known as Sadaqa al-Fitr, is expected during the month of Ramadan, once fasting is finished.

4 *Ramadan*, which is a month of spiritual dedication embodied in abstaining from food, drink and sexual intercourse from before dawn until after sunset.

5 *Hajj*, a pilgrimage to Makka, required once in a lifetime of those Muslims who can afford it. It includes a visit to the *Ka'bah* (the House of God) and involvement in a range of rituals in the neighbourhood of Makka.

Muslim Calendar And Festivals

Muslim Calendar

The Muslim calendar is a lunar one, with each year composed of twelve months and each month of twenty-nine or thirty days. As eleven days shorter than a solar year, the Muslim year means that festival dates move through the solar year and cannot be conclusively dated in advance, depending as they do upon new moon sightings.

Muslim Festivals

Al Hijrah is the first day of the Muslim year and the anniversary of the *Hijra* with which the Muslim calendar begins. This marks the Prophet Muhammad's original migration from Makka to Madina which led to the creation of the Muslim community. Therefore, in the Muslim calendar, the year 2018CE is the year 1439/1440AH.

'Ashura is when *Shi'as* commemorate the martyrdom of *Imam* Husayn, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson and is the occasion for *Shi'a* 'passion plays' and ritual mourning through which they express their sense of identity with the suffering of Husayn's martyrdom. It is the tenth day of the month of the Islamic calendar month of *Muharram* and some *Sunni* Muslims also celebrate this but for other reasons.

Milad al-Nabi is a celebration of the birthday of the Prophet, and is on the twelfth day of *Rabi' al-Awwal*, the third month of the Muslim calendar. It is particularly important among *Barelwis* in view of their special veneration of the Prophet.

Lailat al-Baraat takes place fifteen days before Ramadan and celebrates the popular belief that on this night the fate of humankind is ordained for the next year.

Ramadan is the name of the ninth month (which is either twenty-nine or thirty days long) of the lunar year. During this time Muslims should abstain, from before dawn to sunset, from eating, drinking and sexual intercourse, reflecting devotion to God, increasing self-discipline, decreasing selfishness and developing a sense of solidarity. Children below the age of puberty and people who are mentally unfit do not have to fast or compensate in any way for missing the fast. People travelling long distances may break the fast but should make up for this by fasting at another time for each day they have missed. People whose health would be adversely affected by fasting may fast in compensation at another point in the year for an equivalent length of time. Those who will not recover from the risk of ill health or are very old may offer a poor Muslim a meal or, if they can afford it, the financial equivalent for each day of fasting missed. Menstruating women, pregnant women, and women who are breast feeding, are also not bound to fast. However, they must make up for each day they do not fast by fasting at another point in the year.

Lailat al-Qadr (Night of Power) is believed to be the night on which the Qur'an began its descent to earth and was first revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. It occurs as one of the odd numbered nights of fasting in the last third of the month of *Ramadan*. The *Shi'as* regard *Lailat al-Qadr* as being the twenty third night of fasting in Ramadan. *Sunnis* look for it in the last ten, and especially the odd-numbered, nights. The night belongs to the day following it, rather than to the one preceeding it.

Eid al-Fitr is one of two '*Eids*' (see also below) and is one of the major festivals in the Muslim calendar. It marks the breaking of the Ramadan fast and occurs on the first day of the following month, *Shawwal*. Presents are given and charitable donations are encouraged. The festival emphasises unity and togetherness. An atmosphere of celebration is promoted, with gatherings held at mosques that often overflow outside. Special congregational prayer is offered in mosques after sunrise and enough money to pay for a meal for the poor is offered.

Eid al-Adha is the Festival of Sacrifice which is a three day festival that marks the end of the *Hajj* to Makka and occurs on the tenth day of the *Dhu'l Hijjah* month. It celebrates the supreme example of sacrifice and submission exhibited by Abraham and his son Ishmael. In Muslim countries all Muslim families who can afford to do so sacrifice an animal as Abraham is believed to have done in substitution for his son, Ishmael. A third of this meat is distributed to the poor, with the other two-thirds being shared out, or sometimes a third goes to charity, a third to family and a third to friends. In the UK this slaughter is usually done centrally rather than by individuals.

Further Materials on Muslims in the UK

For a more extensive introduction to Muslims in the UK, see the chapter on 'Introducing Muslims in the UK', in P Weller, ed (2007), *Religions in the UK: A Directory, 2007-10*, Derby: Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby in association with the University of Derby, pp 223-245, to which acknowledgement is made for having drawn upon some of the materials in summarised and, where appropriate, updated form.

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