

Last week I posted on FaceBook that I was attending a program at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond called “Understanding and Engaging our Muslim Neighbors.” I learned a great deal from Dr. Joshua Ralston and several others who participated.

A friend commented on my post and asked “what are the five things I need to know?” Here is my response to her, which also is a summary of some of what I learned last week.

1. There is no generic “Islam.” If you want to ask a Muslim about his or her faith and practice, do so, but don’t expect that what he or she tells you represents Islam as such.

Islam is a world-wide religion with many commonalities (Qur'an, forms of prayer) but also many variants. Think “Christianity.” Who speaks for or can describe all of Christianity? Not the Pope. He only represents the Roman Catholic version, which itself has much cultural variation. No Protestant. Think of all the different Protestant denominations, many of which would describe other Protestants (let alone Catholic and Orthodox) as outside the pale. No one speaks for Christianity as such. Though there are commonalities (Jesus, the New Testament) there is also huge variety in thought and practice. So it is with Islam as well.

2. Muslims worship the one God.

The fundamental theological confession of Islam is: There is no god but God; and Muhammad is the prophet of God. While Muslims have great respect for earlier prophets, especially those who gave their people a book (the Torah through Moses, the Gospel through Jesus), the revelation given through Muhammad is the final corrective to all earlier revelations. Jesus, Moses and other prophets, such as Noah, David, Jonah and others that we recognize, along with Mary, appear frequently and favorably in the Qur'an. But there are certain theological issues surrounding Jesus that are related to the Muslim insistence on the one-ness of God and how God is distinct from creation. These touch on Christian ideas about the divinity of Jesus or Jesus as the Son of God, and the Holy Trinity. God doesn't have offspring; and there can be no Trinity of divine beings. There is only one God and the biggest sin in Islam is to associate anything with God.

3. The scripture of Islam is the Qur'an. The Qur'an is something like the Bible, but not exactly.

The Bible is a collection of writings spanning a period of several hundred years (and maybe more) by a variety of writers. These writings were collected over a few more centuries by the synagogue and the church and recognized as authoritative. The Qur'an was revealed by God to one person, Muhammad, who was a prophet, over the course of just a couple of decades. Muslims believe that the Qur'an is not the words of Muhammad, but rather the very words of God told to Muhammad who then spoke them to his followers. Thus they are authoritative for Islamic faith and practice. They were at first memorized and not long after written down, probably by about 650, just 20 years or so after Muhammad's death. Since the words of the Qur'an are believed to be the actual words of God, the “real” Qur'an exists only in Arabic, the language that God spoke to Muhammad. So Muslims who know their

faith well know the Qur'an in Arabic (often they memorize it or some of it). But a large majority of Muslims are not Arabs and do not speak Arabic. (If you want to read the Qur'an for yourself the translation by Tarif Khalidi is a good place to start.)

4. Muhammad is very important in Islam, but he is not a deity and he is not worshipped.

Not only is Muhammad worthy of the greatest respect as the prophet through whom God's final revelation, the Qur'an, was given; but also Muhammad's own words and deeds provide the lens through which the teachings of the Qur'an are interpreted. These reports about Muhammad's words and deeds are called hadith. There is no single authoritative collection of the hadith, and many of these reports were not written down until 70-300 years after the Prophet's death. Still these (along with reasoning about what the Qur'an and the hadith mean, and also the practices of the community) are the sources of Muslim practice. Many practices that Muslims do trace back to the Prophet's example and not to the Qur'an itself.

5. Shariah, Islamic law, is not nearly so simple as some people make out.

You can find books about Shariah (some good, some terrible) on Amazon. But you can't find a copy of "Shariah Law" as such, as you could a copy of the US Constitution. There are at least five major "schools" of Islamic law, all based on the Qur'an, hadith, legal reasoning and community practices. And there are even differing interpretations within each school. Outfits like ISIS can claim to be operating on the basis of Shariah, but most Muslims do not agree with their version of it. Shariah is really the set of practices that give structure to the lives of Muslims—daily prayer, Friday prayer, the Ramadan fast, as well as marriage customs, finance and many other aspect of life. Some of Shariah involves what we Americans think of as law, and this is where a lot of debates and fears come from. Still, many of these vary considerably from time to time and place to place. If you want to know about the practices of Muslims, ask one. But remember that the story you get will be just one of many variations. Think about asking a Christian what it is they do in church. You will get very different answers from a Roman Catholic, a Russian Orthodox, a Pentecostal, a Baptist, a member of a nondenominational Bible church, as well as from a Nigerian Christian, a Mexican Christian or a German Christian. Or a Presbyterian Christian, although you and I know that the Presbyterian is right.