

**M**uslims might dispute Muhammad's historical position as the "founder" of Islam preferring to see him as the purifier of a more ancient religion, however an objective mind must acknowledge that Islam began as a result of his life and influence.

## Muhammad

Muhammad was born about 570 AD at Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula into an impoverished family. He was orphaned early. Not a lot is known about his early life but he grew up to be a merchant and at the age of 25 he married a wealthy widow fifteen years his senior. In Mecca he was surrounded by polytheism focussing on the *Ka'aba*, a stone cube containing hundreds of god-images. According to Muslim scholars he was illiterate.

From the age of about forty, Islamic history records, he reportedly received visitations from an angel which ultimately were dictated and written down to become the holy book of Islam, the *Qur'an*.

With his wife's support he undertook a preaching program, beginning with his family and friends but later spreading into the community. He urged the abandonment of polytheism which was then normal in Mecca. While some of his family responded, he found himself and his followers subjected to abuse, ridicule and persecution. After thirteen years he and his followers left in 622 AD for Medina where his preaching was more favourably received. There his political influence widened. Nevertheless he came to the conclusion that people had to be forced by physical coercion if they were ever to turn away from their idols.

His followers increased sufficiently in numbers for them to undertake raids against Meccan forces culminating in the Battle of Badr in 624 AD which was a Muslim victory and the Battle of Uhud in 625 which was substantially a defeat. Muhammad, who led in each battle, narrowly escaped death at Uhud.

While these events were unfolding, Muhammad turned his attention to the Jews and their persistent refusal to convert to Islam. It resulted in raids on Jewish settlements resulting in killing, looting and enslavement.

In one settlement a thousand Jewish males were beheaded after surrendering while their women and children were forced into slavery.

By 629 Mecca had been conquered and by the time of his death in 632 AD his influence extended across the whole of the Arabian Peninsula.

Parts of the Qur'an were written while Muhammad was at Medina and parts were written while at Mecca.

Many will not regard Muhammad as an attractive personality. Although gifted and charismatic in some ways, his interests and achievements were primarily political and he became, over time, very wealthy and powerful, often revealing a ruthless streak.

In addition, despite the fact that his own religious teaching allows only four wives, he had at least fourteen wives as well as a number of concubines and female sex slaves. They included his adopted son's wife, Zaynab, Safiyah, who was taken as a spoil of war when her husband was killed, and Aesha, who was only eight or nine years old when Muhammad took her as his wife.

Surprisingly he is known to have produced only four daughters and two sons. Both sons died early.

## Jesus

By contrast, Jesus, who lived from about 4 BC to about 30 AD, openly rejected any pretensions to being a political or military leader. His influence was entirely religious. He never married and, despite the assertions of some popular fictional writing, had no children.

The Bible describes his birth in a humble stable in the town of Bethlehem to Joseph, a Jewish carpenter from Nazareth in Judaea and his wife, Mary, and ascribes his conception to the Holy Spirit. His family had to flee Judaea at an early stage of his life for Egypt in order to protect the child's life until the death of Herod, the King at the time. Little is mentioned about him until the age of twelve when he appears as a clearly-gifted child at the temple in Jerusalem. Again he disappears from the record until the age of about thirty.

The Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry focus on the last three years of his life during which he assumed the role of a wandering preacher, proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God, teaching about God and his standards, pointing to a way of living based on love, performing miracles and exposing the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his day. It began with an act of baptism, a practice which signified repentance in the Jewish tradition but, in the light of the fact that Jesus arranged to have himself baptized, took on a different meaning. It is largely seen as being a symbolic act indicating the right to belong as members of a spiritual family with God as the Father. This parallels the significance of the rite of circumcision to Judaism and in the Old Testament.

This act is now regarded by most branches of the Christian Church, despite some variations in understandings as to its nature, as the rite of entry into membership of the Christian Church

Apart from strongly criticizing the religious authorities of the day and many of their legalistic and venal practices, and despite expectations by some people that he was the long-awaited deliverer of Judaea from Roman rule, Jesus showed no inclination towards violence. Indeed Christians point to the life of Jesus as a model for all people to imitate. He is seen as being without sin, an achievement made possible through a perfect union of his divine and human natures.

He gathered around him a small group of followers who largely failed to understand the fullness of his philosophy until after he was dead. However they did recognize early his special relationship with God.

Eventually powerful interest groups combined to have Jesus arrested, tried in a mockery of justice and crucified, the death of a criminal. It seemed at that point of time that his influence had come to an end and his demoralised disciples began to disperse.

However within days his disciples were publicly claiming that he was alive again and that they had seen him and talked with him. Jesus' body was never produced by the authorities, a logical step to disprove the

disciples' claim. Instead it was put around that Jesus' disciples had stolen and hidden his body. A pointer to the truth is that, of Jesus' twelve disciples, ten eventually suffered and died as martyrs in the sincere belief that what they proclaimed was true.

Jesus' rejuvenated followers went out into the world to carry the message that Jesus had died as a sacrifice, nothing less than God's plan to enable the forgiveness of the sins of Mankind. This forgiveness offers a new beginning to all, one founded on love, the love of God for his human creation and love for each other.

The Christian faith hangs on the truth of the resurrection of Jesus. If it didn't occur, Christianity is a lie.

However if it is true ...

#### Questions for Consideration

1. If you were caught up in an argument within a group, with one person saying "Jesus was a wimp!", another saying "He was a great teacher!", and yet another saying, "He was fictitious character", what contributions could you make?
2. If the same kind of argument related to Muhammad, with one person saying "He was a thug!", another saying, "He was an extraordinary leader!" and yet another saying, "He was a religious genius!", what would be your contribution?
3. If you could find sufficient time to talk to a Muslim about two distinct aspects of Jesus' relationship with people today, what would you choose? Why?
4. Is the text right when it says that Christianity cannot exist without Christ's death and a resurrection? Why?

## Presbyterian Fellowship



## Islam and Christianity *Series*

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