

WHO WE ARE- UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS OF JUDAISM AND ISLAM

PURPOSE

The goal of this session is for participants to develop a basic understanding of both faith groups and to begin to look for commonalities and to respect differences.

PARTICIPANT OBJECTIVES

To begin to learn and to ask questions. This is about listening to one another with a strong desire to learn about each other's faith.

PROCESS

Since facilitating personal encounters is very difficult, this lesson includes more explicit instructions on how to run the session than subsequent lessons will have. Have hard copies available for women to read during the meeting.

FOR GROUP TO READ TOGETHER

Islam

When Islam is understood as a way of life that is not confined to one cultural reality and one that assumes the cultural contours of the different regions or countries where Muslims live, it is easier to highlight and appreciate Islam as a truly global tradition. As Dr. Ahmet Karamustafa, Professor of History and Religious Studies at Washington University in St. Louis, has said: "Not only is Islam not inextricably attached to specific geographic locales (Judaic, Chinese, and Hindu traditions, for instance, have largely been so attached), but it is genuinely adaptable to most, if not all, human communities anywhere on the globe. To put it in other words, the emphasis on Islam's globality enables us to acknowledge and cherish its transcultural, transethnic, transracial, transnational, in short, its truly humanistic dimensions." While Muslims believe that God sent previous Messengers to specific peoples for specific times, Muslims believe God made Islam a religion for all peoples and all times, since no other Messenger will come after the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him)¹

Beyond being a religious tradition, Islam also represents a civilizational tradition, simultaneously in and above specific cultures. Dr. Karamustafa has also said: "As an ongoing civilizational discourse, Islam is an interactive and inclusive tradition: it interacts with the cultures it comes into contact with and, where it takes root, reshapes and reforms cultures inclusively from within. As a result, there are numerous different Islamic cultures on the globe, and they are all equally Islamic, equal partners in the making and remaking of the Islamic civilizational tradition."²

¹ Traditionally, Muslims say the phrase "Peace Be Upon Him" after invoking the name of the Prophet Muhammad. In all further occurrences in this document, this phrase will be abbreviated as "P.B.U.H."

² Karamustafa. "Islam: A Civilizational Project in Progress."

A monotheistic religion, Islam has six “articles of belief”: to believe in one God, God’s angels, God’s revealed scriptures (Torah, Psalms, New Testament, etc), God’s Messengers (Abraham, Moses, Noah, etc), the Day of Judgment, and fate. While the six pillars of iman or belief sum up what Muslims believe, the five pillars of faith in Islam sum up the devotional obligations that all Muslims are required to fulfill. These pillars of Islam are:

1) To testify that there is only one God and that Muhammad (P.B.U.H.) is God’s Messenger; 2) To perform five daily prayers; 3) To pay the annual zakat (2.5% of one’s annual wealth for the poor); 4) To fast during the month of Ramadan;

5) To perform the hajj (pilgrimage) once in a lifetime

DIALOGUE

While we normally think of Islam as a religion, what does the passage suggest about other ways of thinking of Islam?

For Jewish participants: How does this description of Islam change your perception of what Islam is?

What do you think Islam’s five pillars of faith say about the priorities of the religion?

What questions do you have about the origins of Islam and its core beliefs?

FOR GROUP TO READ TOGETHER

Judaism

The word “Judaism” has two distinct and equally legitimate meanings. Sometimes it denotes a full civilization: the total actualities, past and present, of the historic group of human beings known as the Jewish people. In this significance, it embraces secular as well as sacred elements; for example, the long songs of medieval Hebrew poets, the folk music and dance of Eastern European Jewries, social institutions of all sorts, and much else.

Just as properly, “Judaism” may stand for something more limited: the spiritual aspect of that civilization; i.e. religion. The Jewish religion, however, even when isolated from the rest of the civilization, is far from being simple and homogeneous. No less than seven strands weave together to make it up:

1. A doctrine concerning God, the universe, and humanity; 2. A morality for the individual and society; 3. A regimen of rite, custom, and ceremony; 4. A body of law (Halakah);

5. A sacred literature (Torah); 6. Institutions for which the foregoing find expression; 7. The people, Israel—central strand out of which and about which the other are spun.³

DIALOGUE

Judaism contains both secular and sacred aspects. For Muslims: which do you think of most when you think of Judaism? Which parts do you connect with more as a Jew?

How are Judaism and Islam similar or different in regards to the description given? How might understanding the religions in this new framework change the way you approach members of the other faith?

What questions do you have about the origins of Judaism and its core beliefs?