

Meet Muslims

There are around 1.6 billion Muslims, and many of them have different interpretations of Islam. But one belief that holds them all together is this—they worship a single god, Allah (Arabic for “God”). Generally, they follow the teachings of their “final” prophet, Muhammad, who is also the religion’s founder. Muslims emphasize submission to their holy book, The Qur'an (also spelled Koran).

Muslims are committed to community prayer and fasting, prescribed daily rituals, tightly knit families, the Haj pilgrimage and ritual sacrifices. There are two main types of Islam (Shia and Sunni) with deep divisions between them. The smaller branches are Ibadi, Ahmadiyya and Sufism.

Islam often prescribes the culture, national or ethnic identity and government as well as religion in countries where it is predominant. Those who follow folk Islam also turn to the spirit world for divination, healing and cultural ceremonies.

Muslims share with Christians a belief in angels, heaven, hell, final judgment and eternal life after death, though Muslim concepts are different in important ways. They have deep respect for prophets like Abraham, Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist and Jesus as a prophet (not the Savior Lord).

Core values: religious rituals (five pillars of Islam), family, hospitality, friendship loyalty, quality time and generosity.

According to Muslims

Muslims often don’t see their similarities with Christians as much as they focus on their differences—and often not in a positive way. Christians may face some significant misconceptions about who Christ followers are and what they believe, especially if they are trying to have conversations with serious, more orthodox Muslims.

For example, serious Muslims may consider Christians to be pagan worshippers of three gods: the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. They may mistakenly believe something actually blasphemous: that Christians think God and Mary somehow engaged in sexual relations to produce a “son” we call Jesus. They believe Christians rightly respect many prophets, including Jesus, but that it is profane to worship a human man as a god. In their minds, Jesus either did not really die or did not rise from the dead.

In the eyes of serious Muslims, many Christians seem to have a cheap view of God’s greatness, believing they will attain heaven despite shameful lifestyles. Because they believe many Christian women don’t dress modestly—an important Islamic value— they think Christians have low respect for women and should be more vigilant about their families and social values. Some Muslims also think Christians are deceptive and will try anything to win converts.

The majority of Muslims strive to live a life pleasing to Allah. Their approach to Islam is one of reverence and, at times, fear of Allah. They treat the Qur'an, prayer and all aspects of their religion with the

utmost respect and often are appalled by the nonchalance with which Westerners regard God or treat the Christian's "holy book," the Bible.

Connecting With Muslims

So how do we connect well with Muslims? Focus on understanding them first. Show genuine interest—no accusing or confronting. Exchange stories or teachings about shared prophets, but don't debate theology. Refer to Jesus' words and God's stories often in conversation with comments like, "Jesus taught about that. He said ..." or "Praise God for (anything good that happened)," or "Jesus shows me He cares about (healing, providing, bringing peace, etc)." This communicates true respect for God, which is very important to Muslims. Be purposeful when you mention your own faith, perhaps using the words "believer" or "follower of Jesus" rather than Christian, which carries weighty historical baggage dating back to the Crusades.

Expect to spend lots of relational time with new Muslim friends, to serve or eat food every time you meet and to include whole families. The more quality time you spend listening and learning, the more open your friends will likely become to hearing about Jesus. Jesus has shown the true way to God, and you can point Muslims to His power and His teachings by sharing verses and stories from the Word while maintaining respect for what they share. God proves and defends His own word; your job is simply to share what He says and maintain right relationships. When needs arise, ask if you can pray for people in Jesus' name. Most Muslims will not refuse this.

Pray for God's spiritual protection and Christ's love as you interact with Muslims, fallen and fellow image-bearers in need of Jesus.

Always work first to understand the values, hopes and fears of the person in front of you. That helps create peaceful spaces for spiritual conversations where you can introduce them to Jesus as the wonderful Savior Lord that He is.

Engage Muslims With Questions Like...

What do you and your family believe is important for a good life?

What makes a "true" or "good" Muslim? How do you know if/when you are one?

What is your main concern in life right now?

What do you think about Jesus? Could I share why I choose to follow Him?

Meet Buddhists

The second group of people you might encounter are those who follow Buddhism. The leader/founder was Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, from Nepal. He lived around 600 BC. "Buddha" means "awakened one" or "enlightened one."

There are some 500 million Buddhists worldwide, and the religion is growing quickly in the West. It's more a set of philosophies and practices than it is a true religion; it has no god figures (not even the Buddha).

There are two main types of Buddhism: Theravada and Mahayana, each established as a self-denying path to control desires. Buddhism focuses on karma and managing karma (the impact of your actions), and it features four key truths about the nature and causes of suffering and how to overcome it. Buddhists use karma to mean our actions and also speak of the effects of our actions. Buddhism is committed to meditation and achieving enlightened perspectives on reality, but nothing is fixed or permanent. Buddhists also have deep environmental and humanitarian concerns.

Buddhism developed as a response to suffering and a need for peace. It outlines a purpose to life, explains apparent injustice and inequality around the world and teaches a peaceful way of life that pursues real happiness by seeking to downplay or deny suffering and certain aspects of reality.

Core values: peace, mindfulness, tolerance, self-awareness, non-violence and personal responsibility for peace and happiness.

According to Buddhists

Some Buddhists will see clear commonalities of value with Christians, such as charity, generosity, self-sacrifice and self-acceptance, and peace as Buddhists would define it. But much like with Muslims, Christ followers will also have some misconceptions to overcome in connecting with Buddhist neighbors. Many Buddhists consider Christians dogmatic, rigid or oppressive. They think Christian "myths" prevent them from seeing the world clearly and distract them from practical, real questions.

As serious Buddhists are non-argumentative and looking for commonality and peace, they can be suspicious of Christians who seem to have conversion as a goal. Most Buddhists reject the idea of supreme beings or a Creator God. They see the concept of sin as unhelpful. Jesus was a good teacher with some enlightened ideas, but people should not worship him or any other teachers as divine.

Connecting With Buddhists

Remember that your religious language will be foreign to new Buddhist friends. Remember that there are many different Buddhists and not just one kind of Buddhism. ¹Find new ways to articulate truths about what Jesus brings (for example, "freedom from evil/suffering," "achieving eternal peace," and breaking the cycle of "bad karma"). Confrontation and apologetics will not be effective, so instead look for opportunities to share simple teachings of Jesus that are appropriate to the circumstances. Jesus' words carry ultimate, divine authority and can completely transform your new friends' perception of reality. But first it's okay to seek to understand your new friend's personal Buddhism. Pray for God's protective care as you interact with them, since false worldviews can be spiritually tempting at times.

¹ <https://radical.net/articles/sharing-the-gospel-with-a-buddhist/> last accessed 2/20/2020

Engage Buddhists With Questions Like...

How do you think people can individually achieve true peace? How would you define peace?

What has most influenced your ideas about life and the world?

Who would you consider the most enlightened/awakened person you know? May I share mine?

May I share about Someone who opened my spiritual eyes in a transformative way?

Meet Hindus

Have you met someone who says they are a Hindu? The nearly 1 billion Hindus strive for perfectly good lives to achieve a kind of other worldly spiritual existence, an escape from our physical existence. In Hinduism, following a personal guru (leader/teacher) helps a person to be freed from darkness and the evils of life. Many Hindus are looking for true peace, so all life decisions (food, friends, clothes, body) are weighed for their spiritual impact. Key ways to pursue a higher spiritual life include personal purity, external cleansing, mystic disembodiment and specific devotion to a chosen god or goddess.

Most Hindu spiritual and ritual practices emphasize the importance of cultivating ritual cleanliness and mental and spiritual purity. Prayer, worship, meditation, righteous conduct, yoga or austerity are purification practices. Hindu practices aim to purify the person, his or her environment, the world, family, ancestors—getting rid of all that is impure in and around a person. In this way, he or she can become free from bad karma, transgressions, bondage and suffering that are the result of being impure.

Brahman is the supreme being expressed in many gods and goddesses, each of which have unique virtues and vices. Jesus and Mary are acceptable to some modern Hindus as part of the pan-Indian pantheon. There are three major Hindu paths (Shaivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism) based on three different primary gods.

Many Hindus value hierarchies based on race and caste, believing that certain types of people are naturally purer and more holy. Some also are highly superstitious, skilled at animistic efforts to interact with the spirit world, and they put heavy stock in dreams and divination.

For many Hindus, spirituality is connected to social and class standing. Personal agency and positive life direction are extremely important, as is maintaining social respect. Most Hindus are born into their religious system and often both family threats and spiritual fear hold them to it.

Core values: knowledge, education, karma, respect for spiritual authority, support for spiritual values that are recognized by all authoritative religious traditions.

According to Hindus

Some Hindus will see Christianity as the West's colonizing missionary religion. For many, Jesus could be a good example of a guru who leads to one of many spiritual paths to transcendence. Parts of the Bible

contain meaningful teachings, but other parts are too violent and manifest the evil things of the world. They don't see how Christians can be on the path to light while soaking in darkness. They might add Jesus to their collection of gods.

To Hindus, Christians do not take seriously enough the need for good deeds and a pure life, so they view Christian devotion to Jesus (as a guru or a god) as weak. Some Hindus see Christians as lower-caste people who have sold their long, rich identity heritage for money or handouts. That's because the gospel first came to lower caste Hindus and rarely crossed the boundaries of caste in India. Lower caste Hindus often worked menial jobs in Christian hospitals or schools.

Connecting With Hindus²

So how do you connect with Hindus? Respect their long tradition of spirituality and agree, if necessary, about the colonizing, divisive nature of Christianity's history. Work to isolate conversations about Jesus rather than engaging in religious discussions, and focus on your shared need for peace (with God, spiritual, personal, etc.). Jesus has the power to overcome all evil in the world. He has made clear the way to eternal life. When your Hindu friends are open, you can share how your life is being transformed through Christ by God's Spirit. Pray for God's shielding as you interact with them on these eternal matters.

When talking to Hindus, don't see yourself as a converter but as someone who has found the true Light and wants to share it. Find ways to share how Jesus identifies himself: "Did you know that Jesus calls Himself the Light of the World?" Refer often to Jesus' Way. "Jesus' way has important teachings about peace, too!" or "Jesus' Way gave me hope for spiritual life when I was desperate." You might read with them or share how Jesus the Holy Son of God healed ritually impure people with a simple touch. He could not be made impure by contact with unclean people. Instead, He made them clean and acceptable to God. Explain to them that our whole being is unclean, especially our hearts and minds, and Christ has come to make people righteous and pure from the inside out. He has done this through his life, death and resurrection.

Remember not to make assumptions about your new friends. Try to understand their personal and spiritual stories.

Engage Hindus With Questions Like...

How do you know when you find a path/guru/teaching worth following?

What's your deepest hope/fear in life right now?

Who is the most perfect/best person you've personally known? What are/were they like?

² <https://www.imb.org/2018/10/19/im-a-hindu-and-this-is-what-i-believe/> last accessed 2/20/2020

How does a person transform themselves? May I share how following Jesus changes me? How Jesus purified an unclean woman with just a touch?

May I share why Jesus is different and better than any guru in history?

Meet Animists

Animists have an unusually wide-ranging set of beliefs and ideas focused on the power of the spiritual world. They believe everything in nature and the elements contain spirits, and they also believe they interact with the spirits of their deceased relatives. Any number of gods may exist, and unseen forces or spirits are the connection to those gods. Spirits can have either helpful or harmful intentions toward people, and animists' lifestyles are centered around either appeasing or worshiping the various spirits.

Most animists would not consider their beliefs a religion but rather a way of managing a fearful and unpredictable reality. As such, animistic beliefs and practices are often incorporated into various religions. This is syncretism: the mixing of different religious doctrines or rituals. Most animistic traditions have no holy text and rely on their spiritual strong people, or shaman, to guide their lifestyles and spiritual interactions. Rather than an ethical code or moral law, animists have developed magic tools to manipulate the spirits surrounding them and direct their lives. Most animistic groups have strong superstitions, traditions and tokens to protect their values and loved ones.

Core Values: secret knowledge, spiritual power, careful lifestyles, respect for nature and the environment.

According to Animists

Because there are so many spirits and gods, there are many ways to achieve a good life and a positive afterlife. Some animists consider Christians arrogant or dangerous because they claim a monopoly on truth about life and God. Others might find Christians' focus on worshipping a single God far too narrow and risky. If there is a God, he is far too distant and disengaged to have any impact on people's lives. It would be foolish to stop any form of spirit management because that could be personally disastrous or end in a family tragedy. Animists are not necessarily looking for the truth or a knowledge of God; rather, they are hoping to limit the bad things that happen to them and manage spiritual forces to their personal advantage.

Connecting With Animists

Your new friends are trying to control the impact of evil on their lives and have taken the matter into their own hands. While some may have been born into animistic families or cultures, others may have been drawn in after indulging an interest in evil spiritual beings. Either way, your role is to create a safe relational space into which Jesus can come as the God-man with ultimate power and true peace. This will require open ears and careful framing of your own spiritual narrative. Pray for God's protection and insight as you interact with animists who need to be set free from bondage to spiritual practices that are forbidden in Scripture.

Notice if your new friends have any tokens or spiritual items they keep with them and ask about those. Animistic lifestyles are often incredibly fearful, so recognize that talking about their spiritual experiences could be very uncomfortable. Try to reciprocate disclosure and offer to pray in Jesus' name when your friends are disturbed or spiritually uneasy.

Engage Animists With Questions Like...

If you could have anything in life right now, what would it be?

Do you ever sense that there could be a personal but supreme God?

Tell me a story of the most spiritual experience you have ever had. May I share one of mine, also?

Jesus is very important to me. What do you know of Him?

Did you know that Jesus had perfect power over spirits and left the most Holy Spirit to help anyone who chooses to follow Him?

Meet Secularists or Postmoderns or Post-Everythings

Another group you may encounter are secularists or postmoderns. Postmoderns are not identical to secularists, but there are some similarities in how we might begin conversations with secular types and postmoderns or even post-everythings.³

To secularists, religion is mythical imagination and unimportant in understanding and living life. So, God may or may not exist, but he isn't necessary. Spiritual systems and organizations are irrelevant at best, destructive of humanity at worst. Postmoderns are subjectively agnostic about what we can know about any of these questions. They believe we all create our own narratives and create our own reality in some sense. According to them, there is no objective truth out there to discover.

For secularists, happiness is a goal, but people do not have a reliable way to find it. Individual authority and experience are supreme. There is no objective truth; ideas of morality, truth, and ethics are largely subjective and cultural. Institutional claims on truth or authority, like those of religion, are highly suspect. The absolutes claimed by them are oppressive and should be avoided; they are not binding. Although life's problems are highly complex, life is void of clear answers. Most believe people can live any way they choose as long as they don't hurt anyone else.

Postmoderns would largely agree, though they may show respect for those whose stories have a place for God and practice peaceful religion and don't try to convert others to any specific path.

³ <https://www.imb.org/2016/10/26/share-the-gospel-with-post-everything-people/> last accessed 2/20/2020

Caleb Crider helps us find connections this way: “I talk a lot about my need for Jesus. Apart from Christ I’m confused, frustrated, angst-ridden and disappointed. My faith in Him gives me clarity, peace, hope and purpose that makes the world make sense.”⁴

Core Values: Do not judge, do not tell, do not prescribe, stay free/unattached, think rationally (secularists) or embrace your subjective side and don’t worry about finding THE truth (postmoderns).

According to Secularists or Postmoderns

For most secularists, Christians are oppressively moralistic and hopelessly brainwashed by myths. Some postmoderns may also see Christians as patriarchal and discriminatory. Because so many religious institutions have gone terribly bad, they think it is best to give up on the system and trust one’s individual instincts or logic. In their eyes, Christians are woefully irrational and have allowed various leaders to twist their minds. People are essentially good on their own. Christians are creating unnecessary problems with their stories of sin, heaven, and hell. Postmoderns would likely agree with much of this but begin with different assumptions, privileging the existential and subjective sides of knowledge and religious truth.

Connecting With Secularists or Postmoderns

Your new friends are likely proud they have had the self-respect to disassociate from any religious system (secularists) or proud that their narrative is religiously pluralistic and accepts all sorts of religious preferences (postmoderns), so be careful to associate with Jesus rather than a specific religious form. However, stories about your spiritual life with Christ will likely be welcomed once you have listened to their concerns, beliefs, and worries. Communicate how Jesus is real to you, not just a character in a book or a tradition you inherited. Explain how the biblical story makes sense of our life and experience better than any other narrative.

Remember that you don’t need to prove God’s existence—you simply need to live and act like he is present in your life. Rather than arguments, your new friends are looking for evidence of the good life in your everyday life. You can develop a close friendship in which your changed life is easily a topic of discussion. Refuse to enter debates or answer challenges; you’re not trying to argue. Share love and the light of truth. Pray for spiritual protection and wisdom as you listen and introduce others to Jesus.

Engage Secularists With Questions Like...

How do you, or how can we, make sense of all the brokenness and hurt in the world?

Do you ever have existential crises? How do you handle that? Can I share how I handle it?

What gets you most excited about life? Why?

⁴ Ibid

What frustrates you most about _____ (their pet issue)?

Can I share my story about how I found unexpected life purpose through Jesus?

Meet Jewish People

The basic tenets of Judaism are well known to most Christians since they are drawn from parts of the Old Testament. The Torah (first five books of the Old Testament) remains the foundation of Judaism. Through the centuries, however, Judaism has taken on a number of forms, primarily Orthodox, Conservative and Reformed.

Judaism is one of world's oldest religions and, along with Christianity and Islam, one of the major monotheistic religions. Judaism started with the Law given to Moses on Mount Sinai. Jewish people believe in a single, all-powerful Creator God. Their holy book, the Torah, contains God's revealed will and commands.

Spiritual traditions and the religious family devotions are passed down through generations from Abraham. Devout Jews are committed to feasts and sacrifices to help them live a pure life. Rabbis (religious leaders) interpret the Scriptures for life application. Some Jews may believe that Jesus was a historical rabbi while not believing in him as the Messiah.

Jews believe that the world is broken and people are suffering but that a messiah is coming to restore righteousness and full life to those who keep the Law. Based on Moses, there is a clear ethical law all should follow to stay right with God. Jewish people cannot actually practice Old Testament Law because there is no temple or place for Old Testament sacrifices, so the synagogue tradition is followed instead.

Unlike any other people in the world, all Jews are connected in a global community.

Core Values: ritual obedience, commitment, community, ethics, justice, spiritual responsibility, hope, faith.

According to Jewish People

Some Jewish people view Jesus as a good teacher, but only the Torah is from God. Jesus cannot be the Word of God. They may think Christians are violent to focus so heavily on the idea of hell. They also believe the Creator God could never and would never take on a human form. Many Jewish people would consider blasphemous or at least impossible the idea that people can be saved simply by faith, without regard to law keeping or lifestyle. Similarly, many would consider it preposterous to place the weight of their whole existence on a single decision.

Connecting With Jewish People

But even so, you have some things in common. You share a respect for God's Word and God's honor. You also agree that a right relationship with God is imperative. Be careful about your terminology when you mention your own faith—perhaps use the words "believer" or "follower of Jesus" rather than

Christian, which carries weighty baggage for many Jewish people. Though your new friends don't know him yet, Jesus proves to be the perfect Messiah and has a plan to bring a completely new world with perfect law and peace. Find ways to talk about life concerns and values, then bridge to how Jesus can relate to those areas.⁵

Engage Jewish People with Questions Like...

What's most troubling about the world we live in?

Do you think it is possible that God is preparing a better, fuller life and world than this one?

What's your perspective on suffering? Could God ever suffer? Has He?

Could I share why learning about Jesus changed my whole view of God?

Could I share how I believe Jesus has brought me into God's new family?

Meet Catholics or Orthodox Christians

Other faiths you may encounter with your neighbors are Catholicism or Orthodoxy. Like the other worldviews, there are many kinds of Catholics and their beliefs and worldviews differ. While some Catholics are genuinely converted, as in any denomination, not all truly understand the gospel. Some expect religious rituals and good works to tip the scales in their eternal favor. Like many Protestants, Catholics are often not familiar with the official teachings or history of their church. They may not know the Bible well. There are likely substantial differences between the official Vatican theology and what your Catholic neighbor believes. Many immigrants are from predominantly Catholic countries, but their beliefs can vary from those of your Catholic schoolmates or coworkers. Many ex-Catholics are strongly anti-Catholic, but there may be some natural bridges that might lead to deeper gospel conversations.

There are two main traditions in Catholicism—Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic. Catholics believe in One God and Father of all creation and in Jesus as God, and they accept the Trinity. They venerate the Bible, including the books of the Apocrypha, which are not part of the accepted books of the Protestant Bible.

They believe all people are sinful and need saving, but they also believe people must be baptized into the one Catholic institutional church to ensure eternal life with God. They believe the Catholic church's leaders are from a long heritage of apostles that trace back to Jesus. The Church institution, the various sacraments, and the Virgin Mary (Mother of Jesus) can connect a person to salvation.

Catholics hold that rituals of baptism, confirmation (learning a set of teachings), and communion bring a person closer to God. Some Catholics are committed to community prayer and worship, fasting, offerings, taking communion and last rites by the priest prior to death.

⁵ <https://www.dare2share.org/worldviews/jews/> last accessed 2.20.2020

Core Values: family, authority, prayer, worship, morality, obedience to the Catholic traditions and understanding of the Bible.

Catholics hold many teachings in common with evangelical Christians but often base their relationship with God on their rituals and depend on historical saints or institutional leaders to relate to God for them. Church traditions support faith, and connection to organizational church lineage is essential for connection to God. Praying to Mary and other dead saints and relatives is valuable for direction and protection to live a good life. Though Catholics believe they are saved by Jesus' work, they also believe they should be purified by works and prayers before they can see God. Some Catholics are very familiar with the Bible and read it every day. Others are familiar only with church rituals. Others practice a mixture of Catholicism and superstition or animistic Catholicism.

According to Catholics

Officially, evangelical protestant believers are not part of the true faith. Some Catholics also see them as unnecessarily exclusive and divisive, failing to recognize Catholics as the true and original Christians. Catholics have difficulty accepting justification by faith and view conversion differently since salvation is a lifelong process. They believe evangelical believers are missing the fullness of God's revelations by rejecting Papal teachings, church doctrines, and the extra writings that have been added to the Bible. Evangelicals should have more respect for the long heritage and tradition of the Catholic church. Whether Orthodox or Roman Catholic, the Apostolic Catholic is the only true church where genuine unity can be found.

Connecting With Catholics

So how do you start the conversation? Recognize that your new Catholic friends already identify as Christians (maybe even don't consider you a real Christian), so trying to distinguish between your two types of Christianity (or not) will likely prove unfruitful. Because of the worldview and theological similarities, it could be more tempting with Catholics than any others to try apologetic methods and theological debate. But since your new friends already accept the Bible as true, Jesus can open their hearts through his Word. Find ways to pray and read the Bible together, inviting the Holy Spirit to guide your time. Again, remember that your new friends have their own brands and takes on their faith and have personal stories you should seek to understand.

Engage Catholics With Questions Like...

When have you felt most close to God/what do you expect would bring you closest? Can I share what has brought me close to God?

What currently makes you most fearful/hopeful in life?

What have you learned being Catholic about Jesus and who He is? How does a person have a right relationship with God?

What does it take to live a truly good and meaningful life?

Could I share how God gave me new purpose in life?