

## **Introductory notes on Islam for a Christian study group**

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*This is one Christian's understanding of the rudiments of Islam. Hopefully it is useful. But the best way to learn about Islam is to ask an informed Muslim to share with you!*

“Islam” is an Arabic word which means surrendering oneself to the will of God, and achieving peace and security by doing so. A person surrenders to the will of Allah by living and thinking in the way Allah has instructed. Those who follow Islam are called Muslims.

Islam is more than a system of belief. It provides a social and legal system and governs things like family life, law and order, ethics, dress, and cleanliness, as well as religious ritual and observance. Muslims believe that Islam has always existed, but that it was revealed to humanity through the Prophet Muhammad during the 7th CE, in Arabia. Islam is the second most popular faith in the world with over a thousand million adherents.

Sunnis make up 90% of the world's Muslims. The other main group are the Shi'ite Muslims. The countries with the largest Islamic populations are Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. Islam's three holiest places are Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem.

*Everything belongs to God*

Muslims believe that everything in life should be at the service of Allah. They find it hard to accept the distinction that Western cultures make between a person's religious life and the rest of their life. Muslims think such a distinction is entirely wrong. They believe that not only individuals, but also the institutions of society should serve Allah.

Muslims seek to submit to Allah by obeying his commands, and by living their whole lives in a way that is pleasing to Allah. Muslims seek to combine faith and action in everything they do: they regard belief on its own, or good deeds on their own, as pointless.

*Scripture*

The Islamic scripture is the *Qur'an*, which Muslims believe was revealed to humanity by God through Muhammad. According to tradition it was dictated to Muhammad. The *Qur'an* is believed to be a perfect copy of a text existing eternally in heaven. It is considered the actual word of God, and contains the fundamental beliefs of Islam.

The only authoritative text of the *Qur'an* is the original Arabic. Muslims regard “translations” of the *Qur'an* into other languages as paraphrases or versions of the original. Because of its divine origin, traditional belief is that the *Qur'an* has not been altered in any way since first compiled. Copies of the *Qur'an* are always treated with the greatest respect.

The *Qur'an* consists of 114 chapters (called “surahs”), which have names as well as numbers. It is written to be heard rather than read silently off the page. Skillful reading aloud or recitation of the *Qur'an* is highly valued. Some of the *Qur'an* is discursive, but much uses carefully worked rhyme.

The Hadiths are stories of the words and actions of Muhammad and his companions. These stories provide a living commentary on the meaning and application of the *Qur'an*, and Muslims will refer to them if the *Qur'an* doesn't seem to provide an answer to a question they may have.

A large cache of very early Quranic fragments was found in Yemen in 1972. They confirm contemporary views that the early history of the *Qur'an* is more complex than traditionally believed. The *Qur'an* is being subjected to critical-historical study similar to that used for the Bible – stimulating arguments, for example, about the date of the present consolidated text.

Biases in earlier Western study of the *Qur'an*, however, encourage many Muslims to dismiss present efforts outright.

Much of the *Qur'an* seems unintelligible at first, or at least mystical. The lack of editing in its compilation reflects its emergence during Islam's turbulent expansion. Some Western scholars controversially describe the *Qur'an* as a "salvation history" – a theological and evangelistically motivated story of the religion's origins produced late in the day and projected back in time.

Debate in early Islam between those who believed the Quranic text to be eternal and those who accepted that it has been created in time eventually settled on an official doctrine of *i'jaz* asserting that the *Qur'an* was "inimitable". Contemporary Muslim scholars analysing the *Qur'an* as a literary text have been condemned as apostate. Yet their work persists, often at personal risk. Some argue that re-examination of the history of the *Qur'an* is an opportunity for renaissance from within. [T. Lester. "What is the Koran?" *Atlantic Monthly*, 283(1):43-56, 1998.]

### *Basic Articles of Faith*

Muslims have 6 main beliefs:

1. Belief in Allah as the one and only God.
2. Belief in angels.
3. Belief in the holy books.
4. Belief in the prophets ... e.g. Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus. Muhammad is the final prophet.
5. Belief in the day of judgement ... The day when the life of every human being will be assessed to decide whether they go to heaven or hell.
6. Belief in predestination ... that Allah has already decided what will happen. Muslims believe that this does not stop human beings making free choices.

Everyday Islam places emphasises practice more than theology. But there is theological debate. The love of God is found in the *Qur'an*, but it emphasises God's law. Piety centres on meditation on the ninety-nine beautiful names of God. One may hope for the mercy of God but never be assured of it. The doctrine *ofal-mukhalafa*, the utter difference between God and human, offsets Quranic testimony to the love and mercy of God.

### *Allah*

Allah, meaning "The one who is God", is the name Muslims use for the supreme and unique God, who created and rules everything. The heart of faith for Muslims is obedience to Allah's will.

- Allah is eternal, omniscient, and omnipotent.
- Allah has no shape or form and can neither be seen nor heard. Allah is neither male nor female.
- Allah is just, rewarding and punishing fairly. But Allah is also merciful and compassionate.
- A believer can approach Allah by praying, and by reciting the *Qur'an*. God is present with Muslims all the time
- Only Allah is worthy of worship.

- Allah is the one and only God, who has no children, parents or partners. God was not created. There are no equal, superior, or lesser Gods.

### *Action*

The “five pillars of Islam” put faith into action.

*Shahadah*: the Muslim profession of faith: “I witness that there is no god but Allah, and that Muhammad is the prophet of Allah.” Muslims say this when they wake up in the morning, and just before sleep at night. To become a Muslim one needs simply to recite this, with total sincerity, in front of two witnesses.

*Salat*: ritual prayer. Muslims are required to pray five times a day, and although this need not be at a mosque, it must be done according to precise rules. The word ‘mosque’ comes from the Arabic for “place of prostration”.

*Zakat*: giving alms to the poor. This is a compulsory gift of a fortieth of one’s savings each year in addition to charitable gifts. Giving in this way is intended to free Muslims from the love of money. It reminds them that everything they have really belongs to God. Money given as Zakat can only be used for certain specific things.

*Sawm*: abstaining each day during Ramadan, the ninth Muslim month. Sawm is described as fasting, but requires abstinence from all bodily pleasures between dawn and sunset. Not only is food forbidden, but also things like smoking, chewing gum, and any sexual activity. Particularly during Ramadan, Muslims seek to not do or think anything evil. Sawm helps Muslims develop self-control, gain a better understanding of God’s gifts and greater compassion towards the deprived.

*Hajj*: the pilgrimage to Mecca that all physically able Muslims should make at least once in their life. Mecca is the most holy place for Muslims.

### *Islamic mysticism*

Muhammad was himself something of a mystic, meditating, fasting and receiving the *Qur’an* through visionary experiences. Early Muslim devotion was more ascetic than mystic. Early Islamic mysticism was influenced by Christian monks and hermits, by neoplatonism, gnosticism, pantheism and (in the East) by Buddhism.

The extreme asceticism of the early Sufi’s was complemented by *tawakkul*, dependence on God. But this changed to a more positive searching for God and a love relationship with God. In “dying-to-self” (*fana*) the mystic’s individuality was perfected in God.

Various types of Sufi thought and practice evolved, often tending to monistic pantheism. In the fifth century AH, al-Ghazali was able to bring Sufism within Islamic orthodoxy – Sufi’s, he found, had come to a new sense of the love of God, but were not exempt from the path of Islam.

The Sufi’s experience is described in *maqamat* (stages) and *ahwal* (states). Each *maqam* is a step of ethical and ascetic discipline, but each *hal* is a spiritual state that may be experienced.

The Sufi’s have formed into brotherhoods, many of which remain. Sufism is in decline, however, through imposture, charlatanry and superstition. The Wahhabi movement, dominant in the Sa’udi royal family, opposes Sufism as a superstition. [“Islamic mysticism: The most attractive face of Islam?” in N. Anderson. *Islam in the modern world: a Christian perspective*. Leicester: Apollos, 1990, pp. 65-94, 244-246.]

### *Muhammad*

Islamic faith and practice depends on the person, life and revelations of Muhammad. Given to seclusion, meditation and fasting, at about age 40 he began to experience and propound the revelations that make up the *Qur'an*. Rejection by the Jews drove him to allege that they had corrupted their own Scriptures. Muhammad's knowledge and understanding of Christianity is faulty, and based on possibly heretical Christian groups in his neighbourhood. Muhammad's character seems to have been a complex mixture of virtues and human failings.

Muslims believe that:

- Muhammad was the final messenger through whom Allah revealed the faith to the world.
- There had been earlier messengers, among them Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus.
- Muhammad was not a god, but was a man through whom God revealed God's will – although Muslims highly respect Muhammad and follow the example set by his life, they do not worship him.
- Muhammad did not found Islam: it was created by Allah at the beginning of time. Adam was the first Muslim.

Muhammad was born 570 CE at Mecca in Arabia to a family of the Quraysh tribe. His father died before Muhammad's birth, and his mother died when the child was only 6, so Muhammad was raised first by his grandfather, and later by his uncle. The family were not rich, so Muhammad spent much of his childhood tending animals for others in order to earn his livelihood. Muhammad worked first as a trader, and gained a reputation for honesty. His nickname was "The Trustworthy".

When he was 25, Muhammad married Khadija, a wealthy widow aged 40. Muhammad soon showed an interest in spiritual matters and would spend time on retreat in the cave of Hira on "The Mountain of Light" (near Mecca).

In 610CE Muhammad had his first revelation – a vision of the Archangel Gabriel, who told him that he was to be a prophet. There was a gap of 3 years before the next revelation. Muhammad was mocked at first by people who claimed that God had forsaken him, but the revelations resumed and over many years Muhammad is believed to have received the text of the *Qur'an* in a series of revelations. Muhammad proclaimed that the Qur'an was the last Book of God, and that he himself was the last Prophet. With small group of people who believed what he said Muhammad began to spread the message. He publicly condemned idolatrous local beliefs, and religious customs.

Muhammad and his followers were persecuted, and some of them went to Ethiopia to escape. A long period of difficulty followed, but they continued to preach and convert. In 622 Muhammad moved to Yathrib (later to be called Medina) with 70 colleagues; this is known as the *Hijrah* (which means 'emigration' or 'flight'). He formed a tribe of those who accepted him as the Prophet, and gradually Islam grew in strength and acceptance. In 632 CE Muhammad made a final pilgrimage to Mecca with over 100,000 of his followers, and gave his last sermon. He died a few months later at Medina.

### *Islamic Holy Days*

There are only two festivals in Islamic law: *Eid-ul-Fitr* and *Eid-ul-Adha* ("Eid" or "Id" means 'festival').

*Eid ul Fitr*. This marks the end of Ramadan, the month of fasting, and is a festival of great celebration. Muslims celebrate not only the end of fasting, but thank Allah for the help and

strength that given to them throughout the month to practice self-control. The festival begins when the first sight of the new moon is seen in the sky. Everyone wears their best clothes and decorates their home. There are special services out of doors and in Mosques, processions through the streets, and a special celebratory meal – eaten during daytime, the first daytime meal Muslims will have had in a month. Eid is also a time of forgiveness, and making amends.

*Eid ul Adha*, The Festival of Sacrifice. This festival marks the end of the Hajj or holy pilgrimage. It is celebrated by all, not just those on the pilgrimage. The festival celebrates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son and reminds Muslims of submission to God, and their own willingness to sacrifice anything to God's wishes. During the festival Muslims who can afford to, sacrifice domestic animals, usually sheep, as a symbol of Abraham's sacrifice. The meat is distributed among family, friends and the poor.

Other special days include:

*Al-Hijra*, New Year's Day. This festival commemorates the Hijra (or Hegira) in 622 CE when the Prophet Muhammad moved from Mecca to Medina. The Hijra was the beginning of the growth of Islam into a world faith.

*Ashura*. Ashura has been a day of fasting for Muslims since the days of the early Muslim community. It marks two historical events: the day Noah left the Ark, and the day that Moses was saved from the Egyptians by Allah.

*Milad un Nabi*, Birthday of the Prophet. Muslims think about Muhammad, and the events of his life. Muslim parents will tell stories of Muhammad's life to their children.

*Lailat al Miraj*, The night journey and ascent of the Prophet Muhammad, and the revelation of Salat.

*Lailat al Qadr*, The Night of Power. The festival of The Night of Power marks the night in which the Qur'an was first revealed to Muhammad. Muslims regard this as the most important event in history. They spend the festival in study and prayer. Some will spend the whole night in prayer or in reciting the *Qur'an*.

### *Fundamentalism*

The monotheism and relative simplicity of Islam are attractive. Yet it is a formal religion, not without theological problems. Challenges for Islam come from its dominant, theocratic and dogmatic character. Tendencies to secularism and modernism compete with reaction, xenophobia and "Islamic fundamentalism". It is to be seen whether modern democracy and Islam are truly compatible.

Initially, Islamic legal practice accepted some individual opinion but this came to be regarded as too subjective and fallible. The *Shari'a* has multiple influences and borrowings not always in conformity with the *Qur'an*. By the fourth century AH, the right of independent reasoning by a qualified jurist (*ijtihad*) had largely disappeared. The law became increasingly rigid and moribund, reinforced by insistence that humans cannot apprehend morality without the enlightenment of divine revelation. (This is again debated today.)

Few governments have tried to enforce the *Shari'a* fully. Elaborate devices have been used to accommodate modern legislation. The *Shari'a* provides a background somewhat like natural law.

### *Fundamentalism and the Shari'a*

Unrest against Western colonialism helped seed a diverse so-called "Islamic fundamentalism", the unifying theme of which is a desire to return to the *Shari'a*.

To about 1850 CE, the *Shari'a* was the only basic law. For the Sunni, it came to have four main sources: the *Qur'an*, the Sunna of the Prophet, consensus among jurists, and analogy. But the liberty of jurists to derive law from the sources (*ijtihad*) declined. Four orthodox schools of legal interpretation remain, but there are those who do not conform to them – notably the Shi'as. The main branch of the Shi'as believes the last Imam to be represented authoritatively by the *mujtahids* (in Iran the Ayatullahs of today).

In the mid-nineteenth century CE the Ottoman Empire enacted extensive reforms to commercial and criminal law, based on the French codes. Reformed law of torts was based on Islamic foundations, but also enforced in civil courts. Family law (in the widest sense), however, was left to the *Shari'a* courts. Basic women's rights were protected. Similar steps occurred in the emerging post-colonial Muslim countries, but Saudi Arabia retains the *Shari'a*. Given the high religious status of the *Shari'a*, changes can be achieved only through complex expedients. ["Islamic fundamentalism: 'Back to the *Shari'a*!'", in N. Anderson. *Islam in the modern world: a Christian perspective*. Leicester: Apollos, 1990, pp.95-114.]