

What is Islam?

What does “Islam” mean?

The Arabic word Islam means “submission” in the sense of submitting to the will of God (Allah in Arabic) i.e. his will as defined by Islam.

Muhammad and the origins of Islam

The standard Muslim teaching on the origin of Islam is as follows. Islam was founded in the early seventh century in Arabia by Muhammad, a merchant born in the city of Mecca. According to the sources (which are all Muslim) Muhammad was born in 570 or 571. He was employed by a wealthy widow called Khadija to manage her caravan trade, work which involved travelling and gave him the opportunity to meet with Jews and Christians. When he was 25 Muhammad married Khadija, who was then aged 40. They had seven children, all of whom died young except for a daughter called Fatima. After 25 years of marriage Khadija died, and Muhammad went on to marry a further 12 wives.

Marriage to Khadija made Muhammad a man of some importance, and enabled him to find time to meditate on religious matters. By the time he was about 40, he had become very concerned about the pagan beliefs of his fellow Arabs. He began to spend time meditating in a cave on a mountain a few miles from Mecca. During these periods of meditation, he believed that the angel Gabriel appeared to him and gave him messages to preach to the world. These supposed “revelations” were gathered together later by his followers and became the Qur’an.

Although most of the people of Mecca rejected Muhammad’s preaching, he gradually gathered a small band of followers, some of whom were his relatives. By 613 there were probably about 50 Muslims.

The hostile opposition of the Meccans eventually led Muhammad to send his followers to seek asylum elsewhere. Some went to the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia (modern Ethiopia) and others went to a city about 250 miles north of Mecca, which

became known as Medina. Muhammad himself was amongst those who went to Medina. He was warmly welcomed by the citizens, who were longing for a strong leader to unite them.

The year of Muhammad’s migration (*hijra*) from Mecca to Medina was 622. The *hijra* was such a turning point in Muhammad’s career that it has become the starting date of the Islamic calendar (see below). Many Muslims view the *hijra* as the first of a series of clearly defined stages in their political quest to establish an Islamic state modelled on the example of what Muhammad did; for such Muslims, migration can be the first part of the process of Islamisation.

Muhammad soon became the supreme ruler of Medina – effectively statesman, legislator and judge. In 623 he began sending his followers out to raid the trading caravans from Mecca, and within a few months he was leading these raids himself. Many tribes converted to Islam to avoid being attacked by the Muslim armies. The military power of the Muslim community in Medina increased. The Meccans surrendered to them and Muhammad entered Mecca victoriously, destroyed the pagan idols in its sanctuary (the *kaba*) and turned it into a centre of Islam.

By the time Muhammad died in 632 the Muslim armies had conquered virtually the whole of the Arabian Peninsula, although the degree of Islamic control varied from place to place. After his death, his successors continued his programme of military expansion.

How the faith developed

Muhammad continued to receive more “revelations” after he moved to Medina. However the content of these “revelations” and of his preaching was somewhat different from what he had preached in Mecca. For example, in Mecca Muhammad had preached that Muslims should be friendly towards Jews and Christians, even recognising the validity of their faiths. He had told Muslims to face

Jerusalem when they prayed. In Medina he became increasingly hostile towards Jews and Christians, and told his followers that they should now face Mecca when they prayed.

It was during his time in Medina that Muhammad established Friday as the day for corporate worship and introduced the annual month of fasting. He also taught that the Qur'an was God's final revelation to mankind, and superior to all previous revelations.

Islamic scriptures

Qur'an

The most important Islamic scriptures are the Qur'an, a compilation of the "revelations" received by Muhammad over a period of 23 years. Muslims believe that the words of the Qur'an are engraved in Arabic on a stone tablet in heaven and that therefore there can only be one version of the Qur'an. Modern scholarship has shown that there were in fact many different versions of the Qur'an in circulation in the first 20 years after Muhammad's death. Caliph Uthman (died 656) decided to suppress all but one version, but variants did survive into the twentieth century in certain parts of the world.

The Qur'an is roughly the same length as the New Testament. It consists of 114 suras (chapters). The first sura is a short prayer addressed to God, which Muslims recite daily. The rest are messages from God to his people, and are arranged in descending order of length, with sura 2 the longest. The suras have names as well as numbers, for example, the Moon, Noah, the Elephant. It has many references to Jews and Christians and also to Bible characters including Christ himself. However, the stories of the Bible are mostly repeated in a distorted form, and the Qur'an explicitly denies Christ's deity, Sonship and crucifixion.

Because of the suras being arranged by length (not by date or by content), the Qur'an cannot be understood by simply reading it from beginning to end. There are also other reasons why the meaning of this book is hard to discover. The oldest manuscripts were written in a Kufic script which showed only the consonants. The result was as

ambiguous as if all the vowels and punctuation were removed from an English text. Furthermore, the Qur'an is very contradictory because of the way in which Muhammad's attitude and teaching changed after he emigrated from Mecca to Medina. Muslim scholars generally teach that, in cases of conflict, a later verse abrogates (cancels out) an earlier verse. But the scholars do not agree on the chronological order of all the verses. For many Muslims the mere recitation of the words in Arabic is the important thing; understanding the meaning of the words recited is not considered vital.

There are many different English translations of the Qur'an, some of which arrange the suras in a different order from the Arabic. Another source of confusion is that the way the suras are broken down into numbered verses is not the same in every translation. So when looking up a reference, it may be necessary to check a few verses before or a few verses after the verse number given. Comparing various versions of the Qur'an in translation shows a wide variety of meanings and interpretations. Sometimes these interpretations are incorporated in the text itself, other times the meaning is clarified in footnotes. Some versions are produced specially to present the Islamic faith in an attractive light to non-Muslims.

Hadith and sunna

Second in importance to the Qur'an are the *hadith*. These are stories recounting what Muhammad and his earliest followers said and did. The stories were handed down from one person to another and eventually collected together by various Islamic scholars. The *hadith* are used to explain and interpret the Qur'an.

The word *sunna* is used to describe the actual actions of Muhammad, which are seen as a model for Muslims to copy. The *hadith* are the narratives which record these actions.

The authenticity and reliability of any particular hadith is important in assessing how much influence it should have on guiding a Muslim's behaviour.

Shari`a

Using the Qur'an and the hadith, Islamic scholars in the eighth to ninth centuries developed a set of

detailed regulations to govern every aspect of life – political, economic, social and legal as well as worship, personal religious practices and family life. This is the *shari`a*, Islamic law. There are several different versions of *shari`a* as different scholars came to their own conclusions using the same sources of Qur'an and hadith. Given the sources used and the dominance of the Islamic state at the time, it was natural that these rules were made for a context where Muslims held the reins of political power.

Modern scholarship has shown that much of the *shari`a* reflects a Jewish background and also includes elements of the Roman law and other non-Muslim cultural practices which the early Muslims would have encountered in the lands they were conquering. Some scholars have also pointed to Hellenistic, Zoroastrian and Indian elements in *shari`a*. (These findings are contrary to traditional Muslim beliefs.)²

What Muslims must believe and do

The Islamic creed states simply: "There is no god but God and Muhammad is his messenger." This creed contradicts the deity and Sonship of Christ as well as the Christian belief that He is God's final revelation. But there are a number of other doctrines which Muslims must believe as well as some religious duties they must practise.

Articles of faith

These are six articles of faith which Muslims must believe in:

1. **God** - specifically the unity of God (i.e. rejecting the concept of the Trinity)
2. **Angels** - Contrasted with the angels are the jinn, some good and some bad. The devil (called Iblis or Shaytan) is sometimes described as an angel, sometimes as a *jinn*.
3. **Books** - Muslims believe that God revealed his will through his prophets and through 104 sacred books of which only four remain today: the *Taurah* (the Pentateuch), the *Zabur* (Psalms), the *Injil* (Gospels or whole New Testament) and the Qur'an. Muslims

do not in practice show much reverence for the first three as they believe that Jews and Christians have distorted their own scriptures.

4. **Prophets** – including many of the Old Testament prophets and other Old Testament characters, Jesus, and a host of other prophets known only in Islam, with Muhammad himself as the final prophet.
5. **Day of Judgement** – This will be preceded by various signs, wars and catastrophes. The Antichrist will appear and also a figure called the Mahdi, who will fight against the Antichrist and restore Islam to its original perfection and glory, setting up God's kingdom on earth. Christ will return (as a Muslim) to help the Mahdi defeat the Antichrist, to convert all Christians to Islam and to destroy all crosses. Finally there will be a general resurrection and judgement. All non-Muslims will go to hell. All Muslims will go to heaven though, according to some traditions, many will have to spend a period in hell first.
6. **Predestination** – God has decreed all things both good and bad. Humans must submit to his will and accept their fate.

The five pillars of Islam

These are what every Muslim must do:

1. **Confessing the faith** i.e. repeating the creed (see above).
2. **Prayer** – There are precise rules about clothes, cleanliness, posture and gestures, direction (towards Mecca) and the Arabic words to be used. A good Muslim prays five times a day.
3. **Fasting** – During the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, Ramadan, Muslims must fast from sunrise to sunset, abstaining from food, drink, perfume, tobacco and conjugal relations. In the evening there is exuberant feasting. Young children are excused from fasting. The sick, pregnant and those travelling may postpone it for another time.

4. Alms-giving – Every free, sane, adult Muslim (except the very poor) must give a proportion of his or her income to help needy Muslims and the Islamic cause. In Sunni Islam the rate is 2.5%.

5. Haj (pilgrimage to Mecca) - Every Muslim should perform the haj at least once in their lifetime. It should be done in the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar, Dhul Hijjah.

Jihad – a sixth pillar?

Some Muslims consider jihad to be a sixth pillar, i.e. an obligatory duty on every Muslim. Others do not give it such importance. Jihad (which literally means “striving”) is interpreted in many different ways. For some Muslims it means the personal struggle against sin and temptation. For others it means doing good. But in the early days of Islam jihad meant military warfare for defence and to expand the territory under Islamic rule; many Muslims in our modern times also understand *jihad* in this way.

Islamic festivals

The Islamic calendar consists of twelve months alternately 30 or 29 days long: Muharram, Safar, Rabi al-Awwal, Rabi al-Thani, Jumada al-ula, Jumada al-Thani, Rajab, Shaban, Ramadan, Shawwal, Dhul Qadah, Dhul Hijjah. The Islamic year is only 354 days long. That is about eleven days shorter than the astronomical year, so annual festivals falling on the same Islamic date are celebrated on a different date of the Western calendar each year.

The calendar was adopted by Muslims in about 632, and was backdated to start on the equivalent of 16 July 622, marking the year of Muhammad's *hijra* from Mecca to Medina. The letters A.H. after a year mean “after hijra”. On 1st November 2006 A.D., the Islamic date was 9th Shawwal 1427 A.H.

In addition to the fasting month of Ramadan, some of the more important Islamic festivals are:

- *Eid al-Adha (Feast of Sacrifice)*, 10th Dhu al-Hijja. Commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son (Ishmael in the Muslim version of this story). Considered by many the holiest day of the year. Special prayers

and visiting friends and family

- *Eid al-Fitr (Feast of the Breaking of the Fast)*, 1st Shawwal. Marks the end of the fasting month. Special prayers and gifts, sweets and food.

- *Laylat al-Qadr (Night of Power)*, usually 27th Ramadan. Commemorates the night on which Muhammad received his first “revelation”. Many pray all night.

- *Mawlid al-Nabi (Muhammad's Birthday)*, 12th Rabi al-Awwal. Celebrated by dressing in bright colours, exchanging gifts, burning incense and lighting candles. It is not kept by Wahhabi Muslims.

- *Ashura*, 10th Muharram. Shi'as commemorate the martyrdom of Hussein at Karbala (in modern Iraq) in 680 A.D. It is the most important day in a whole month of mourning, and is celebrated by men flagellating themselves until they bleed.

Women and non-Muslims

Muslim women are always under the protection of a male relative. On her good reputation depends the honour of the whole family, so she must behave modestly and cover herself from wrist to ankle as well as her hair. A woman's place is in the home, bringing up the children, and she must above all be obedient to her husband.

There are many rules in the *shari`a* which favour men over women. For example, it is much easier for a man to divorce his wife than vice versa. A man may have up to four wives, but a woman can only have one husband. A Muslim man can marry a Jewish or Christian woman if he wishes, but a Muslim woman is only allowed to marry a Muslim man. The complex inheritance rules give more to men than to women. A woman receives less compensation than a man for any given injury and in some circumstances her testimony in a lawcourt is worth less than a man's.

The treatment of non-Muslims is also carefully spelled out classical Islamic teaching. Pagans are

to be fought until they convert to Islam, but Jews and Christians (known as the People of the Book) are permitted to practise their faith within the Islamic state. This is however conditional on them conforming to various demeaning regulations designed to reinforce their lowly *dhimma* status in comparison with Muslims. One particular condition imposed on them was the payment of a special poll-tax called the *jizya*. Like women, they receive less compensation and their testimony carries less weight than that of a Muslim man.

Sunni, Shi'a, and other kinds of Islam

Sunnis and Shi'as

A violent split occurred within the Muslim community in 657. The dispute centred on who should be caliph or supreme ruler of the Muslims, but later many other doctrinal differences developed. The result was three groupings:

- *Sunnis* (80-90% of all Muslims today).
 - *Shi'as* (10-20% of all Muslims today, a majority in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan and Bahrain)
 - *Kharijis* (non-existent today, though a sub-sect are still found in Oman, East Africa and North Africa)
- Over the following centuries, the Shi'as split again many times resulting in many different sects including the Ismailis, the Druze and the Bahais.

Sufis

Islamic mysticism is known as Sufism, and Sufis can be found in most other groups and sects. Central to Sufism is the desire for a personal loving relationship with God and a feeling of closeness to him. The methods used to try to achieve this feeling are meditation, using the Muslim rosary, and repeating one or another of God's names to try to enter a trance. One of the Sufi brotherhoods use a rapid rotating dance to enter into a trance, and are sometimes called "whirling dervishes".

Folk Islam

"Folk Islam" is the term used to describe the mixture of Islam and various non-Muslim cultural practices, particularly superstitious or occult practices, which is followed by many Muslims, especially the uneducated and poor and especially women. The main concern of folk Islam is to try to use spiritual powers to meet felt needs, such as healing, exorcism

and protection from evil jinn. It involves curses, vows, amulets and pilgrimages to the tombs of Muslim saints who are seen as intercessors. Muhammad is considered a powerful intercessor and venerated almost as if he were God.

Wahhabis

Wahhabism is a strict and puritanical movement within Sunni Islam which was founded by Abd al-Wahhab in the Arabian Peninsula in the eighteenth century. Wahhabis condemn Sufism and folk Islam. Wahhabism is now spreading rapidly across the world, because the oil wealth of Saudi Arabia is being used to promote it.

Salafis

Salafis are Sunni Muslims who seek a return to the purest form of original Islam as practised by Muhammad and the two generations that followed him. They reject everything new, and do not even accept the traditional Sunni forms of *shari`a*. They are guided by their own direct and literal interpretation of the Qur'an and *hadith*. Although the terms "Salafism" and "Wahhabism" are often used interchangeably, Salafis consider themselves to be more radical purifiers than the Wahhabis. Salafis have very strict codes on dress and behaviour, and most ban modern inventions such as photography, conventional banking and elections.

Liberals

A very small minority of Muslims have adapted their faith to conform to modernity. They accept the Western understanding of concepts like human rights, democracy, equality, freedom of thought and speech, separation of state and religion, and are willing to criticise their own faith and Islamic history. They are bitterly criticised by many other Muslims and their lives are often threatened.

Islamists (often called fundamentalists)

These are radical Muslims who want to revive Islam's glory. They are active in seeking to transform their societies to conform with *shari`a*, and eventually to Islamise the whole world. They want to replicate the first Islamic state which Muhammad established, and take literally the classical Islamic teaching about expanding Islam by *jihad*. Some are willing to use violence and terror to achieve their goals. Islamists are a minority, but a growing minority as the conservative majority is becoming

increasingly radicalised.

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