



Islam

An Introduction to Islam

The word "Islam" derives from the three-consonant Arabic root SLM which is usually translated as "submission" or "surrender" – but seldom with the implied "to God" (and only to the one God). And since the words submission and surrender seem to be "loaded" words in the English language and in the American experience, perhaps a clearer picture comes from other meanings which we find listed in the Arabic dictionary: "reconciliation, resignation; to be safe and sound, intact, secure; to preserve, keep from injury, protect from harm."

It is also of course the same root word meaning "peace" (as in the Hebrew shalom SH L M), or more fully: soundness, well-being, wholesomeness.

A rule of Arabic grammar has the meaning of words altered slightly by the addition of prefixes and suffixes. Add the prefix M to SLM and you get a Muslim – literally one who embodies the qualities expressed in the word Islam.

There is an inherent problem in transliterating these words from a language where there are no lower and upper case letters (but only one way of rendering letters) into a language with capital letters and lower case letters. Perhaps we inscribe a different meaning in the word Islam than in the word islam, and likewise with Muslim as opposed to muslim. We all know the difference between a "small d" democrat and a "large D" Democrat. It might do

well to keep these in mind when considering Islam/islam. When the Qur'an speaks of "islam" it speaks of a state of being and a "muslim" as one who embodies this being. It should not give offense therefore to learn that the Qur'an speaks of Jesus, Moses, Abraham, Noah, and Adam, as "muslims."

It is the western non-Muslim who sees "Islam" as the name of a particular religion and "Muslim" as a follower of that religion. If we discard the meanings inherent in these words with capital letters, we will come closer to understanding the Qur'anic meaning of the words.

About "Allah"

"Allah" is the Arabic word for God. A Muslim is anyone who says publicly, "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is a messenger of God." The term "Muslim" is not synonymous with

"Arab." The former is a religious term, the latter is linguistic/cultural. Only one-fifth of the world's one billion Muslims speak Arabic as their mother tongue. "Muslim" and "Arab" are not interchangeable terms. Twelve million Christians and ten thousand Jews live in Arab countries and consider themselves Arab.

"Allah" therefore is the Arabic word used by Arabic-speaking Christians, Muslims, and Jews as the word for God. We can hear its counterpart in the other two semitic languages – Aramaic (Jesus called God "Allaha") and Hebrew (*Ellohim*). It makes no more sense to say "Muslims worship a god called Allah" than to say "The French worship a god called Dieu" or "The Spanish worship a god called Dios."

Qur'an

Muslims believe the Qur'an is God's word as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad through the angel Gabriel. Statements by Muhammad himself are collected in the Hadith, not the Qur'an. The Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad over a period of twenty-three years. It was memorized and recited to others who also memorized it. The Prophet Muhammad was guided by the revelation itself to understand the proper ordering of the chapters and verses, and it began to be written down. The chief secretary to the Prophet Muhammad, Zaid Ibn Thabit, was responsible for overseeing the task of recording the revelation in written form. Recounting many stories also present in

Basic Attributes of a Muslim

- God-consciousness, God-awareness
- Trust in and Reliance on God
- Eradication of the "grave diseases of the heart": pride, arrogance, vanity, envy, jealousy, malice, rancor, greed avarice; love of worldly wealth, property, status, pomp, and power; anger and rage; lust and public sensuality; hypocrisy; the sins of the tongue
- Truthfulness and Sincerity
- Justice
- Patience, Perseverance and Steadfastness
- Prayer and Charity (cultivating a sense of wonder and a grateful heart)
- Modesty and Humility
- A Universal Outlook and the Pursuit of Knowledge

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Judaic and Christian traditions, the Qur'an states that Christians and Jews (as well as Muslims themselves) are "People of the Book" (*Ahl al-Kitab*) who, as believers, hold juridical rights under Islamic law to live as protected people. (See the section: Qur'an.)

Muhammad

Muslims believe (because the Qur'an so states) that Islam did not begin with the Prophet Muhammad. He is only the last in a long line of prophets that began with Adam and continued through Noah, Abraham, Solomon, Moses, and Jesus. The Prophet Muhammad is not the "founder" of Islam. He is revered but not worshipped by Muslims. His role was that of transmitter of the words that God revealed to him. Muhammad was clear that Muslims should "call me the servant of God and His messenger." Understanding Muhammad as the messenger makes it clear why for Muslims the attention is on *the message* (the Qur'an). Stories about Muhammad's life, his teachings and sayings are contained in the *Sunna* and *Hadith*, which are secondary in importance to the Qur'an.

Hadith

Just as people memorized and wrote down the text of Qur'an, so too did they memorize and record what the Prophet Muhammad said and did, when he was not reciting the Qur'an. The records of his words and the reports of his activities came to be called hadiths.

Since both the sayings of Muhammad recorded in the Hadith and the verses of the Qur'an are words people first heard from Muhammad's mouth, Muhammad himself always distinguished carefully between his words and God's words, and all Muslims have preserved this distinction, whose importance cannot be overemphasized. God's words are uncreated and must not be confused with those of his messenger. The Qur'an always takes pride of place. Muslims say and write, "God says,"

when referring to the Qur'an and "the Prophet said," when referring to the Hadith. (See the subject of hadith discussed further in the Qur'an section.)

Three Dimensions of Islam

Religion is always considered a right or correct way. In the Islamic understanding, religion includes right ways of doing things, right ways of thinking and understanding, and right ways of forming the intentions that lie behind the activity. The Prophet Muhammad gave each of these right ways a name: *islam* (submission) pertains to acts, *iman* (faith) pertains to thoughts, and *ihsan* (doing what is beautiful) pertains to intentions. (See the Primary Source Document presented in the Qur'an section for a Hadith explaining these three aspects of Islam.) It would make perfect sense to take these three aspects as a focal point for study of Islam, asking: What "acts" should Muslims perform? What "thoughts" are "Islamic"? What "intentions" should lie behind the deeds of a Muslim?

Priesthood/Church

Islam has neither churches nor priests. In place of churches, Islam has mosques. These are locally established places of worship without any central authorities that allow us to talk about "the Mosque" as we talk about "the Church." There is no Muslim "pope." There are no Muslim priests. In place of priests, Islam has *ulama*. Priests, in a religion like Christianity, perform a function that ordinary people cannot. In the case of Islam, there are no religious functions that cannot be performed by every adult member of the community. At the same time, certain Muslims have a special religious vocation. As two professors who have long taught about Islam explain:

Everyone had heard of ayatollahs and mullahs. Without trying to sort out the different names that are used, let us just say that the generic term for individuals who play a special religious role is

ulama (Arabic 'ulama', plural of 'alim) The word simply means "the learned." . . . Fundamentally, their function is to be – as contemporary

SUNNI MUSLIMS SHI'A MUSLIMS

Muslims identify themselves first as "Muslims" rather than as members of a branch of Islam, just as Catholics or Protestants identify first as Christians. Only if asked, will a Muslim say, "I am Sunni (or Shi'a)." Ninety percent of the world's Muslims are Sunni, although a majority of the Muslim populations in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain are Shi'a.

The origins of the split was political, but later the differences became theological as well. When Muhammad died in 632 A.D., the Muslim community disagreed about its next leader. One group, the majority, wanted him to be elected (we would call such decision-making "democratic"). These were later called by historians the Sunni or "orthodox/mainstream" (following the example, *sunna*, of the Prophet). A minority wanted Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law appointed as successor. Those who supported Ali were called "Shi'a" (or "Shiite") by later historians, as the word means "party of" or "partisans of [Ali]." While both Sunnis and Shi'as believe in and practice all the pillars of the faith as taught by the Prophet Muhammad, they disagree on the proper historical development of Islamic leadership. And there are examples in urban centers throughout the Muslim world – and here in America – where Sunni and Shi'a do not build separate mosques, but rather worship together, shoulder-to-shoulder in the same mosque.



jargon has it – “resource people.” They have gained specialized knowledge about Islam and are willing to employ it for the good of the community.¹

No ordination is involved in becoming one of the ulama. Local communities have no trouble in identifying who amongst them has knowledge, insight, the right heart and content of character. Such a person will be asked to lead prayers, provide the Friday “sermon,” and minister to the community’s needs. The elected board of the local Islamic association or mosque will often raise the funds to pay such a person’s salary, so that they need not work elsewhere to earn a living. The point is there is no outside authority that makes these decisions. Every local mosque and association is autonomous.

Sharia (Islamic Law)

According to Muslim jurists, the sharia is derived from four sources: the Qur’an; the *Sunna* (life examples) of the Prophet, which are embodied in the Hadith (teachings/sayings); *Qiyas* (logic, most closely that of “analogy”); *Ijma* (“consensus” of the community of believers). Islamic law is a flexible and sophisticated system of justice based on the Qur’an and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, and the opinions of Islamic scholars. It’s flexibility can result in very different decisions – from Muslim society to Muslim society – from Yemen and Tunisia to Afghanistan and Pakistan – and each application is said to be “according to Islamic law.”

Women

Before Islam, women in Arabia had few rights. Islam’s reforms included a woman’s right to possess and dispose of property, to keep her name after marriage, to become a guardian over minors, to undertake a trade or profession, to sue in court without her husband’s approval, and to individually tailor a marriage contract.

In assessing the situation of Muslim women today (in whatever specific locality, culture, and tradition) it is important to differentiate between the subjects of “Islam”/“Muslims” and “Women.” To understand the status and role of women in Islam, we would need to look not at how some Muslim societies have interpreted these issues, but at Islam itself – at Islam’s primary text – The Qur’an.

Jihad

The Arabic word *jihad* is derived from the three consonant root J H D and is accurately translated as exertion of effort or directed struggle. It does not mean “holy war” and indeed the Arabic word for war (*harb*) is not to be found in the Qur’an. The Prophet Muhammad said the highest form of jihad is the personal struggle to make oneself a better Muslim.

An American convert to Islam (and former NBC Middle East Bureau Chief) explains:

Jihad (the struggle) is perhaps the most original conception in Islamic thought; in military and political terms the concept carries the moral weight of social responsibility we have come to understand in Western secular terms as the popular liberation war.²

The Qur’an condemns wars of extermination or territorial conquest. But it is a religious duty, according to the Qur’an, for the entire Muslim community – women as well as men – to struggle in the world, in self-defense for their lives, property, and freedom. This is the “Lesser Jihad.” The “Greater Jihad” is any strenuous serious individual effort – intellectual, physical, spiritual – for the good.

And there are Islamic rules of war that include these provisions: to spare children, old men, and women; to respect private property; to kill domestic animals only for food; and not to destroy animals, crops or fields that provide food for people. These Qur’anic teach-

ings explain the Arab conquerers’s relatively gentle treatment of civilian populations. “There is to be no compulsion in matter of religion,” states the Qur’an and accordingly, early Muslim rulers permitted Christians and Jews to retain their own beliefs, leaders, courts, and places of worship. Muslims paid taxes to support public institutions – hospitals, orphanages, universities, and libraries. Muslims were also expected to serve in the army, and to defend the state against attack. Christians and Jews (as well as Zoroastrians and Sabaeans) who were capable of military service, paid a special tax in lieu of this military service which was required only of Muslims. This was the *Dhimmi* tax.

Notes historian Will Durant in his monumental *The Story of Civilization*:

They were... offered a degree of toleration hardly equaled in contemporary Christian lands. They were allowed the free practice of their faiths, and the retention of their churches, on condition that they wear a distinctive honey-colored dress, and pay a poll tax according to their income. This tax fell only upon non-Muslims capable of military service; it was not levied upon monks, women, adolescents, slaves, the old, crippled, blind, or very poor. In return the Dhimmi were excused (or excluded) from military service, were exempt from the two and a half percent tax for community charity, and received the protection of the government... Despite or because of this policy of tolerance in early Islam, the new faith won over to itself in time most of the Christians, nearly all the Zoroastrians and pagans, and many of the Jews, of Asia, Egypt, and North Africa.¹

Islamic Revivalism

The Western term “fundamentalism” does not accurately describe the modern movements in Islamic countries to renew Islamic values in Muslim personal and public life. Muslims prefer “revivalism” as a more accurate de-



scription of this renewal, whose manifestations include an increase in religious observance (mosque attendance, Ramadan fast, wearing traditional Islamic modest dress); a revitalization of mystical orders; the growth of numerous religious publications and media programming; support for the implementation of Islamic law; and the growth and establishment of Islamic organizations and movements.

Islamic scholar John Esposito points out:

The forms. . . vary almost infinitely from one country to another, but here are certain recurrent themes: a sense that existing political, economic, and social systems have failed; a disenchantment with and even rejection of the West; a quest for identity and greater authenticity; and the conviction that Islam provides a self-sufficient ideology for state and society. . ."

View of Other Religions

Islam is an inclusivist religion in the sense that it recognizes God's sending of messengers to all peoples and his granting "scripture and prophethood" to Abraham and his descendants, the latter resulting in the awareness of a very special link between Muslims, Jews, and Christians. Throughout history there have been believers who discerned the truth of God and responded in the right manner. Of these "Muslims before Muhammad" the Qur'an mentions, among others: Abraham, Solomon and the queen of Sheba, and the disciples of Jesus. This inclusiveness is also expressed in the Qur'an's recognition of earlier scriptures. Islamic tradition holds that there have been 104 revealed texts, and the Qur'an names four of them: the Torah (the first five books of the Christian Old Testament), the Psalms, the Gospels, and the Qur'an. *Ahl al-kitab* ("People of the Book") is an often used expression that denotes this inclusiveness. Muslims understand "People of the Book" to include them-

Muhammad's Wisdom

In the biography of the Prophet Muhammad by the eighth century historian Muhammad Ibn Ishaq, there is this story: Muhammad often helped the inhabitants of Makkah to settle their disputes. Once, the Kaaba caught fire and was burnt to the ground. When it was rebuilt, all the tribes of Makkah took part in its construction. But when it came to fixing the sacred Black Stone in the wall, a quarrel arose amongst the Makkkan leaders – all wanted to have the honor of fixing the stone. Finally, they agreed to select a judge from amongst them and abide by his ruling. The judge was Muhammad; and his solution to the problem saved the honor of all concerned. He spread a cloak on the ground, placed the Black Stone in the middle, and asked the tribal leaders to each take hold of the edge of the cloak and carry the stone to its site. Muhammad then fixed the stone in its place. It was his integrity, honesty, and wisdom that earned Muhammad the title of *Al-Amin*, "the trustworthy."



Illustration by Zafar Abbas Malik from Introducing Muhammad. See Resource section for details of how to order this remarkable book.

selves, Christians, and Jews.

Islam in America

Although Islam is one of the world's great religions, numbering nearly a fifth of the world's population, it is not usually thought of as an American religion. This has now changed. There are six million Muslims in America, making them the second largest religious group in the United States, after Christians. Their numbers are greater than the total membership of the Episcopal Church, or the United Church of Christ. It is safe to say that every urban center of the United States has at least one mosque or Islamic center, usually several. (For a demographic look at Muslims in America, see the section Muslims Worldwide.)

Analysts of the American scene are beginning to include the presence of Is-

lam in America. After all, the White House observed Ramadan in 1996! The "We" in who we are as Americans, now includes Muslims.

NOTES

1. Sachiko Murata and William Chitick, *The Vision of Islam* (New York: Paragon House) 1994, p. xxxiv.
2. A. Schleifer, *The Fall of Jerusalem* (New York: Monthly Review Press) 1972, p. 136.
3. Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization: The Age of Faith* (New York: MJF Books) 1950, pp. 218-219.
4. John Esposito, "Islamic Revivalism," *The Muslim World Today*, Occasional Paper No. 3 (Wash. DC: American Institute for Islamic Affairs) 1985, p. 1.