

Islam

In 610AD Muhammad, the founder of Islam, experienced the first of a number of encounters in which, he believed, the archangel Gabriel gave him messages to preach to mankind. Soon he became the centre of a new religious movement, criticising pagan idolatry and calling upon people to worship Allah alone. The new religion was called Islam; its followers are called Muslims.

From the outset, Islam was spread by the sword. By the time of his death in 632, through the preaching of Islam and by military conquest, Muhammad had unified the Arab tribes, politically and spiritually, under his own leadership. Within one hundred years his successors, the caliphs, had created an empire that extended from India to Spain.

Today there are over 1.5 billion Muslims in the world, making Islam the world's second largest religion.

God

Islam is strictly monotheistic. Muslims make a special point that Allah, their god, has no son and that there is no Trinity.

Creation

Allah created the universe out of nothing. Having existed before creation he does not need anything in creation. He has, however, made his existence evident in creation.

Man

Human beings have dignity, but are not made in the image of God, since the nature of God and the nature of man are utterly different. Allah made the first human beings from the dust of the earth and breathed life into them. They were created to live in unconditional surrender to the will of Allah.

Man's Problem

According to Islam human beings are not born with sinful natures; they are sinless until they rebel against Allah. Allah will judge each person by the balance of good or evil that he or she has done. He is under no compulsion to be merciful, so even the most pious Muslim is not guaranteed entrance into paradise.

The Solution To The Problem

Allah does nothing to deliver Muslims from their sins: everyone must atone for his own sins by confession and good works.

There are six articles of faith that Muslims must believe and five practical duties they are obliged to perform.

Six Articles Of Faith

The six articles of faith which Muslims must believe concern:

1. **Allah:** There is no god but Allah. He is omnipotent and omniscient and is one, having no equal and no partners.
2. **Angels:** Angels are created beings and servants of Allah. Two Recording Angels attend every man: the one on his right records his good deeds and the one on the left his sins.

Contrasted with angels are jinn, some of which are good and some are evil. Many Muslims will take precautions to protect themselves against evil jinn. The devil (Iblis) is sometimes described as a jinn and sometimes as an angel.

3. **Books:** Allah has revealed his commands to men through his prophets and through 104 sacred books of which only four now remain: the Pentateuch, the Psalms, the Gospels and the Qur'an. It is claimed that Jews and Christians have distorted their own Scriptures so that only the Qur'an — Allah's final revelation to mankind — is reliable. It contains 114 messages or suras.
4. **Prophets:** Muhammad is "the seal" of a long line of prophets. Of these, nine are considered major prophets — Noah, Abraham, David, Jacob, Joseph, Job, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Each was sent by Allah to illustrate his different attributes. Muslims do not worship any of the prophets but consider them to set examples for mankind to follow.
5. **Judgement:** The Day of Judgement will be preceded by clear signs that will include natural catastrophes, the coming of Antichrist, tumults and seditions and Christ's second coming as a Muslim. There will be a resurrection and, forty years later, a weighing of deeds. Those whose good deeds outweigh their evil deeds will attain salvation: some immediately and others after a period in Hell. The remainder, including all infidels, will abide in Hell for ever.
6. **Allah's Sovereign Decrees:** Muslims must submit to Muhammad's will. Their doctrine of absolute predestination amounts to fatalism.

Five Duties

The religious duties required of Muslims are referred to as the five pillars of Islam. All are based on specific commands in the Qur'an or hadith. There are other duties that, while considered necessary are not obligatory.

1. **Confession:** All Muslims must testify to their belief in Allah as one God and Muhammad as his prophet.
2. **Prayer:** There are five obligatory times of prayer to be observed every day. Certain regulations and rituals must be followed if the prayers offered are to be valid.
3. **Fasting:** Fasting from dawn till dusk must be observed during the ninth month, Ramadan.¹ There are other voluntary fasts.
4. **Alms giving:** Every Muslim of full age must give alms in proportion to his property.
5. **Pilgrimage:** Every Muslim must undertake a pilgrimage to the Kaba in Mecca at least once in his lifetime. Intricate rules have to be observed in connection with the pilgrimage.

The Final Outcome

Muslims believe that there will be a future resurrection of the body and a time of judgment. There are two possible destinations for humans upon death. Faithful Muslims will receive paradise and all others will go to hell.

Paradise is a place of great bliss, often thought to be a beautiful garden. Here all the desires of faithful Muslims are fulfilled, especially those of men, who are rewarded with beautiful young virgins. On the other hand, hell is a place of eternal fiery torment.

How Do We Know These Things Are True?

According to Islamic belief, Allah has revealed his message to mankind in the Qur'an. The text of the Qur'an is engraved on eternally existing tablets but was dictated verbatim in Arabic to Muhammad over a period of 23 years. Muslims believe that the Qur'an has been preserved without any change and that it cannot be properly translated into any other language.

¹ Because the Muslim calendar is based on lunar months the season at which Ramadan occurs varies.

The Hadith is a collection of traditions describing the words and deeds of Muhammad and his companions.

Distinctive Practices

Jihad

Some Muslims add jihad as a sixth pillar. Jihad, which literally means 'an effort of striving', is the waging of religious war. Some understood it to refer to spiritual warfare: the struggle to rid oneself of debased behaviour and persevere in achieving moral excellence.

The Qur'an commands all human beings to obey Allah but there is no need for Muslims to evangelize the non-Muslim world since Allah is said to "hate" the infidel (kafir). The mission of Islam is conquest, often by means of the sword. Infidels are to be defeated, silenced, or expelled.

Shariah — Islamic Law

Where the Qur'an and Hadith are silent rules are derived by consensus of the religious leaders and by reasoning from rules to be applied in similar cases. The combination of these four sources has been used to create a detailed body of regulations known as the Shariah or Islamic law. In Sunni Islam (see below) there are four schools each with its own version of the law. The Shiah version is different again.

Shariah regulates not only every aspect of a Muslim's personal life but also the governing of an Islamic state. It assumes that power lies in the hands of the conquering Muslims and there are many rules relating to non-Muslims — particularly Jews and Christians — who are treated as second-class citizens and have to pay a special tax. Shariah has survived unchanged for eleven centuries.²

Divisions Within Islam

The first major division within Islam arose in 656 after the murder of the third caliph. Two parties were formed.

The Shias believed that successive leaders (imams) should be chosen from among the living descendants of Muhammad to be guides to the faithful. They considered their imams to be infallible and sinless.

The Sunnis believed that the nation's elders should freely elect a caliph and that the Qur'an and traditions were more important for the guidance of the faithful than any living leader.

Both parties still exist. The Shias have always been in the minority but their influence was concentrated in Persia (modern-day Iran) which became and still is the Shia stronghold.

Through history various Muslim ruled countries have asserted their independence from the caliphs of Baghdad and various traditions and schools of Muslim thought have developed. The Sufis, for example, are the mystics of Islam who give expression to their deep longing to know God and his love personally in various ascetic practices and rituals.

Questions For Discussion

1. Islam is the world's fastest religion. Why do you think that is?

Words You Might Not Have Recognised

Monotheism The belief that there is only one God, as found in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

² There is no country today that rules according to the full Shariah but many have elements of it within their legislation and the attitudes behind it are often prevalent in Muslim communities.