

An Introduction to Islam

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Contents

What is Islam?.....	4
How do we know what God wants us to do?	5
Who was Prophet Muhammad?	6
So if Prophet Muhammad brought the same message as the prophets before him, why is Islam different from other religions?	8
But why would God send some people to Hell if He loves us so much? .	9
So is religion just a personal thing, related only to our own self and our destiny, or does it have anything to do with society?.....	10
But why face Mecca?	11
Social responsibilities?	12
How are Muslims supposed to act?	14
Women too?	15
Who are Muslims?	16
Notes.....	18

**In the name of Allah, Most
Gracious, Most Merciful**

What is Islam?

The true meaning of “Islam” is “peace” or “submission to the will of God”. A person who follows Islam is called a *Muslim* (or *Moslem*). The central idea of Islam is that because God cares about us, He does not want us to go astray. Therefore, He sent His guidance to us. We therefore owe it to ourselves and to Him to behave in the way that He has shown us. If we follow the commandments of God, we will achieve inner peace as well as societal harmony. But if we disobey them, we will not only be miserable, but society will suffer as well.

How do we know what God wants us to do?

Islam gives two answers. First, Muslims believe that every human being - regardless of religion - intrinsically distinguishes right from wrong. For example, everyone understands innately that it is wrong to steal. But repeated exposure to false ideas and our own misdeeds weaken our inner sense of judgment. Plus, as individual human beings, there are many things that we lack the wisdom to understand. Therefore, we cannot risk solely relying upon our own potentially faulty ideas of how to live our lives. Instead, we need to look towards divine guidance to learn how to reform and improve ourselves to reach the level of humanity that God created us for.^[1]

Despite the fact that Islam is often branded as a religion of “intolerance”, it is in fact one of the world’s most tolerant religions because it acknowledges that most of the world’s major religions - especially Judaism and Christianity - also originally came from God. Therefore, Muslims do not believe that someone is automatically going to Hell just because they are a Jew or a Christian (although they do believe that if a religious truth becomes available to someone and he insists on ignoring or denying it, he will be held accountable).^[2] The basic Islamic world view is this: out of His mercy, God sent prophets to every people. He sent some prophets to guide a particular group of people, and some to guide all of humanity. Some of the most important prophets whom He sent to guide all people were: Prophet Adam (the father of humankind), Prophet Noah (as in Noah’s ark), Prophet Moses (who brought a revealed text akin to the Torah), Prophet David (who brought the Psalms), Prophet Jesus (yes, Prophet Jesus), and Prophet Muhammad.^[3] Because people would not follow a corrupt prophet just like they would not follow a corrupt leader, all of the prophets were of perfect moral character and did not commit sins. The last of the prophets was Prophet Muhammad, and, after him, no more revelations are necessary. It is up to human beings to choose to follow or reject the message - a choice that everyone must make in a responsible way.

Who was Prophet Muhammad?

Unfortunately, his personality tends to be largely unknown in the West. Prophet Muhammad was born in the year 570 C.E. in the city of Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula. He led a difficult life. Before he was born, his father died; and soon after he was born, he lost his mother as well. Although his grandfather 'Abd al-Muttalib - the leader of their clan (the *Quraysh*) and caretaker of the *Holy Kabah* - immediately took him in and showered him with love, these irreparable losses at such a young age instilled a firsthand sense of empathy in him towards orphans, who are given special attention in the revelation of God. He worked hard and became renowned for his honesty and upright character. People of all walks of life came to him to entrust their valuables to him and seek his advice; in later years, many would continue to do so even though they had become inimical to him on account of message that he brought.

When he was in his twenties, he began to work for a wealthy businesswoman named Khadija leading trade caravans. Although 15 years his elder, she was greatly impressed by his character and felt that he would make a suitable husband for her. Thus, she sought his hand in marriage. They married and enjoyed a happy and stable marriage until the end of her life. Khadija bore him several children, the most notable of whom was Fatimah Al-Zahra, who was renowned for her service to religion and to the poor and is considered a role model for women throughout time.

Although the society around Prophet Muhammad consisted largely of idol worshippers, Prophet Muhammad never worshipped anyone but God. He used to devote long hours to spiritual contemplation and frequently would seclude himself in the desert to be alone with God. One night, when he was 40 years old, he was alone in a cave in the Arabian desert when, all of a sudden, an angel came to him and commanded him to bring the first revelation:

***Read! Read in the name of your Lord who created,
Created human beings from a small clot of blood.*
Read, and your Lord is most generous!
It is He who taught man by the pen,
Taught him what he knew not. (96:1-5).***

Prophet Muhammad went back to his wife Khadija and told her what had happened, and she became the first person to believe in his message.

For the first few years, the number of Muslims remained few. And then Prophet Muhammad received the command to publicize the revelation. Overnight, the Muslims became the subject of severe torture and persecution. The Prophet sent many of the Muslims to Africa for their own safety, and he and his relatives were exiled and forced into a small corner of the desert, where they were forbidden to have contact with anyone. During this time, Khadija used the wealth she had earned to smuggle food and water to them, but the conditions proved too harsh for her, and she died soon afterwards.

Eventually, their exile was lifted. Gradually, Islam spread until, by the end of Prophet Muhammad's life, almost the entire Arabian Peninsula and

beyond - which had hitherto been a land of idolatry, warfare, and hedonism
- had been united peacefully under the message of God.

So if Prophet Muhammad brought the same message as the prophets before him, why is Islam different from other religions?

Actually, it isn't. All divinely inspired religions were sent to spread the same teachings of faith and morality, although the legalistic aspects have differed from time to time, depending on human circumstances. The Qur'an teaches that it was God's final revelation sent to complete - not to replace - prior religions; this concept is sometimes known as "progressive revelation".^[4] It is believed that God allowed humanity to develop to the point it did before revealing His final word because only at that time did humanity have the capacity to preserve and proclaim His final word without alteration.

The Qur'an discusses many subjects, ranging from God, history, the soul, the Hereafter, spirituality, morality, and religious law. Like the Old Testament, it was revealed in a Semitic language - specifically, Arabic. In its original language, it is unmatched in terms of eloquence, and its very literary style is taken as proof of its divine origin since no one yet has been able to produce anything similar to it (although many have tried).^[5] It also refers to many scientific facts that were unknown during the time of Prophet Muhammad and only became known in the past two centuries; these references are also taken as further proof of its divine origin. Although it has been translated into many languages, translations of the Qur'an are not considered to be equivalent to the original text since the original text is the word of God, whereas translations are the word of man. It is worth noting that while skeptics may claim that Prophet Muhammad wrote the Qur'an himself, it certainly did not come from him personally, since his own recorded words have a style far different from that of the Qur'an. In addition, Prophet Muhammad never received any education and was never known to have read or written anything. That too is taken as a sign of the divine origin of this religious book.

The most fundamental question that the Qur'an answers is "**Who is God?**" The Qur'an teaches that God is unique and matchless. He existed before creating the universe and will continue to exist forever. He created everything in its best possible form, and all of creation - animate or inanimate - praises Him in its own unique way.^[6] He honoured human beings with intellect and free will so that we would use these capacities to come to know Him. Although his might and power is infinite, He is also closer to our own souls than anything else.^[7] He provides for us and loves us even more than parents love their children.. God responds to all of our prayers, although not always in the ways that we expect. He does not commit the slightest injustice.^[8] While He has the power to punish us, He has promised to forgive us our sins if we sincerely regret and try to make amends. He is above being manifested in earthly form and does not have a son or a partner. He sent our souls to this world to be tested and developed, and, in the Hereafter, he will judge us according to our intentions and our actions and send us to Heaven or Hell

But why would God send some people to Hell if He loves us so much?

For one thing, if he didn't send some of us to Hell, it just wouldn't be fair. For example, if someone lived a horrendous life on earth, killed thousands of innocent civilians, and tortured and imprisoned innocent people, we would be angry at God if that person were to then be allowed to enter Heaven. Plus, Hell is a deterrent. No one wants to suffer eternal punishment, so many people will avoid committing sins - sins that would not only harm themselves but also the society around them - in order to avoid facing divine wrath. And finally, Muslims believe that our actions themselves leave a lasting effect on our souls. If we commit so many evil deeds that our soul is destroyed, we would not be in any condition to appreciate being in a position of nearness to our creator. Thus, the only choice for that sort of soul would be Hellfire.

So is religion just a personal thing, related only to our own self and our destiny, or does it have anything to do with society?

Nowadays, in the Western world, religion has been greatly distanced from society and politics and, for many people, has been relegated to a solely personal matter between themselves and God. While our individual relationship with God is the basis of our faith, Islam does not accept that religion is solely a personal thing, and it maintains that it also has a role to play in society as large. God did not send His guidance just to develop our own personal selves but also to help healthy societies develop which would encourage people to take the right path. While the Qur'an clearly states that religion should not be forced on people, certain socially detrimental practices - such as flagrant adultery or drinking - are banned not just because they are personally harmful, but because they also tear at the fabric of society. Islam and politics is a touchy subject, but it can be said that, without doubt, Islam provides examples for how political leaders should conduct themselves, and how an Islamic government should uphold justice and the rights of the poor and oppressed.

Group worship practice also plays an important role in Muslim life. For example, Muslims are often seen carrying out ritual prayers five times a day facing the city of Mecca. Someone who is unaware of what they are doing might think that they are looking for lost glasses or "bowing to Mecca", whereas in fact what they are doing is taking time out of their lives to remember God and thank Him for His blessings. Praying five times a day not only brings us closer to God, but it also helps us to avoid committing sins since we know that, in only a few hours, we will have to again face our Creator.^[9]

Of course, Muslims are also encouraged to worship God on their own. In addition to the five daily prayers - which may be recited alone or congregationally - Islam offers many other spiritual avenues to seek nearness to God such as midnight prayers and spiritual texts (du'a) and encourages Muslims to spend time in individual spiritual reflection. By combining individual and communal worship practices, Islam helps human being grow spiritually both as a group and as individual souls.

But why face Mecca?

Muslims believe that the cubical shrine in Mecca called the Ka'bah was the first house of worship ever built, and in fact it long predates Prophet Muhammad. And of course Mecca was the birthplace of Prophet Muhammad and the center of Islam. Facing Mecca establishes a spiritual link between the individual and the spiritual center of the religion. It also establishes a sense of religious unity and brotherhood since, no matter what country one is in, everyone's attention is constantly turned towards Mecca. And turning towards Mecca daily reminds Muslims of the heroic struggles of Abraham and Ishmael and the importance of making the once in a lifetime pilgrimage, or hajj, to the city of Mecca.^[10]

The pilgrimage is one of the most unique and well-known aspects of Islam. Although many religions encourage pilgrimages to holy sites, the pilgrimage to Mecca is the largest pilgrimage that attracts pilgrims from all over the world and has happened continuously for over 1,400 years.^[11] In modern days, it is not unusual for several million Muslims at a time to descend upon the city of Mecca during the time of the pilgrimage. Despite the fact that pilgrims come from all different cultures, languages, and backgrounds, the pilgrimage operates smoothly, and anyone who comes there feels a sense of peace and safety. Although surrounded by millions of strangers, pilgrims feel that they can even sleep in the middle of the street, and no one will bother them.

The pilgrimage is at once a spiritual and a social experience. Primarily, it is a time dedicated to God. Special forms of worship establish a new link between the pilgrim and the Creator, and the vast crowds of pilgrims all clad in white filling the Arabian desert bring to mind a sense of what the Day of Resurrection must be like. But the pilgrimage has a social message too. Everyone - rich or poor, weak or powerful - has to wear the same rough, white garments; undergo the same restrictions; and stand shoulder to shoulder and carry out the pilgrimage rituals together. By performing the pilgrimage together, Muslims realize a sense of human brotherhood and human equality and return to their homelands with a new perspective on their spiritual and social responsibilities.

Social responsibilities?

According to Islamic belief, wealth is a trust from God. God provides for everyone, rich or poor. But if, for some reason, a person's sustenance is denied him, it is the community's responsibility to step in and give from the wealth that God has granted them. Islam strongly encourages people to give charity not only out of human compassion but also out of self purification and to build bonds between fellow human beings.^[12] In addition, it also requires Muslims to donate a fixed percentage of their excess income on a yearly basis to provide for the destitute. In doing so, it attempts to bridge the gap between the wealthy and the underprivileged.

Another well-known religious practice is **fasting during the month of Ramadan**.^[13] Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, and since the Islamic lunar year is slightly shorter than the solar year, it falls successively earlier each year, allowing people to observe the month of Ramadhan in different seasons throughout their lives. During this month, Muslims are supposed to abstain from eating, drinking, smoking, and intimate relations from dawn until dusk (people who are ill, traveling, pregnant, or nursing are exempt). Ramadan is a time of socializing as well as spirituality. At the end of the day, Muslims gather with their families and neighbors to break the fast together and read special prayers and value this time as a time of togetherness. Conversely, fasting also strengthens an individual's relationship with God. Since fasting prevents a person from being focused solely on physical needs, it enables him or her to focus more clearly on God and purify the soul. The last days of the month of Ramadan have particular spiritual value and are dedicated to worship and the remembrance of God.

After the month of Ramadan comes **Eid Al-Fitr**, one of the most well-known Islamic holidays. This holiday commemorates the end of the season of fasting. On this day, Muslims gather together and offer special group prayers and pay visits to one another. Most Muslim cultures also have special foods and special customs for this time. Another well-known holiday is Eid Al-Adha, which falls during the season of pilgrimage. Eid Al-Adha marks the day when Prophet Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son to prove his loyalty to God. After obtaining agreement from his son, he took him to the mountains and was about to sacrifice him when God sent an angel to inform him that he had passed the test and did not need to sacrifice his son after all.^[14] Other Islamic holidays include the birthday of Prophet Muhammad and Ashura, which is a sad occasion on which many Muslims commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Husain, who - along with his family and followers - gave his life to preserve Islam and to save the people from tyranny and oppression.

Another commonly recognized feature of Islam is the hijab, or Islamic modest dress that covers everything except a woman's face and hands. One of the most frequent questions that Muslim women in the West face is: **"Why are you wearing that thing on your head?"** Islam requires women to cover all of their bodies - including their hair - except for their face and hands - for the sake of modesty.^[15] The idea behind the hijab is that women should be viewed as human beings, not as sex objects, and that a women's

sexuality is a private matter between herself and her husband and is not a matter of public discourse. By observing the hijab, women maintain greater respect for themselves in public and feel less pressure to evaluate their self-worth based solely on appearance. A society in which the majority of women observe the hijab also tends to have more stable families. As long as their clothing is modest and covers the appropriate areas, Muslim women are free to wear any style of clothing that they like. Different styles or colors of clothing are cultural and bear no religious significance. Men also have modesty requirements for their clothing, but because they are not required to cover their heads, their clothing does not differ from the norm in the West. They are however expected to grow at least a small amount of a beard.

How are Muslims supposed to act?

One of the most oft-quoted sayings of Prophet Muhammad is: “I was sent to perfect noble moral character.” Therefore, Muslims look to his example - and to the teachings of the Holy Qur’an - to guide them in how to live their lives in the most upright fashion.

Like other religions, Islam stresses the overarching moral ideals of truth, justice, compassion, brotherhood, and generosity. The Qur’an commands Muslims to uphold truth and justice even at the expense of themselves or their relatives.^[16] Any form of favoritism or classism is unacceptable. In addition, Muslims are taught to care for other human beings regardless of their religious or ethnic origins. As Imam Ali said: “Either a human being is your brother in faith or your counterpart in Creation.” Eating while others are hungry or neglecting neighborly responsibilities is unacceptable. Finally, it also emphasizes family values - especially respecting parents, strengthening marriages, and maintaining family ties.^[17]

Women too?

Islam propagates the same moral ideals for both men and women. Unlike some other philosophies, Islam does not distinguish between the spiritual capacities of men and women and expects the same high level of moral excellence from both.

Islam also distinguishes itself from some other religions in that it does not consider the creation of woman as secondary. Unlike some other ideologies, Islam maintains that God created man and women - Adam and Eve - on an equal footing, and it refutes the idea that Eve was a “temptress” condemned to an eternal curse.

However, Islam does teach different social ideals than those common in the West today. While Islam encourages women to participate constructively in society, it discourages them from carrying themselves in a way that draws negative attention. Islam does mandate education for both men and women, and so women are expected to be educated in some way. It does not offer any opinion regarding career choices for women, unless a career would impinge on the dignity of a woman, in which case it would be disallowed. However, Islam also encourages early marriage for both men and women and places the burden of financial responsibility on the husband. Ideally, then, women are not expected to have to support themselves - although, as a matter of practice, many do undertake career paths.

Who are Muslims?

- (a) Middle Easterners
- (b) Foreigners
- (c) A selection of people from virtually every nation
- (d) All of the above

Say “Islam”, and various images may come to mind. Most likely, they are images of people from another race, another country, and another culture. But, in fact, Muslims come from all countries of the world - from America to China. Although Islam has the reputation of being a “desert religion”, the country with the largest number of Muslims is Indonesia, followed by India and the Subcontinent. Only 15% of Muslims actually live inside the Arab world. Most Western countries also have Muslim minorities, some of whom are immigrants, and others who are converts or the descendants thereof.

Because Islam does not impose specific cultural practices on people, Muslims have many different social customs. However, they are also united by shared religious habits. For example, every Muslim recognizes the universal greeting *Assalaamu ‘alaykum* (“peace be upon you”), to which the reply is *Wa ‘alaykum assalaam* (peace be upon you too). Because Islam strongly emphasizes maintaining ties with one’s family, most Muslims - regardless of culture - have large extended families, and family relations play an important role in social life. But aside from these shared customs, Muslims also have a wealth of diversity, and in any mosque you can see one person in traditional African dress next to another person in a business suit next to another person in traditional Asian clothing all praying side to side.

Historically, Islam was viewed as the antithesis of the West, and something that belonged solely to the “East”. However, ironically, **Western society was shaped more by Islamic civilization than many people know**. For example, since the first universities came from the Islamic world, the graduation gowns worn at graduation ceremonies come from the traditional clothing that Muslim students used to wear at their schools. For many centuries, most scientific knowledge emanated from the Islamic world, to the point that European scholars had to learn Arabic in order to translate the Arabic texts into Latin. In particular, advances in chemistry, geography, mathematics, astronomy, and medicine mostly came from the Islamic world. For example, most high school students are aware that “algebra” comes from the Arabic word “al-jabr” (meaning “the untying of knots”). Even the very use of the number zero and the Arabic numerals themselves came from the Islamic world (and thankfully so, since no one wants to be doing sums in Roman numerals). A quick glance at any starmap which bears names of Arabic origin such as “Deneb” and “Aldebaran” bears witness to this cultural crossover. Nevertheless, despite all of the effects Islamic civilization had on the West, Islam itself remained largely a stranger.

Nowadays, all of that has changed. Not only do virtually all countries have Muslims living in them, but in many places -such as America - Islam is the fastest-growing religion. **So is it possible to become a Muslim?** Since the message of Islam is for all people and all time, anyone can become a

Muslim. Conversion to Islam is surprisingly common, particularly among women. The formal method of conversion is to declare “There is no god but Allah*, and Muhammad is His Messenger” in front of witnesses. However, anyone who seriously intends to convert to Islam should first research the religion and develop a thorough understanding before making a profound life commitment since Islam is not just a part-time religion but is a complete way of life.

Notes

- * A reference to the shape of a human embryo in its early stages of development
- * The Arabic word for "God"

Translations from the Holy Qur'an by A. Yusufali

[1] *So set thou thy face steadily and truly to the Faith: (establish) Allah's handiwork according to the pattern on which He has made mankind: no change (let there be) in the work (wrought) by Allah; that is the standard Religion, but most among mankind understand not. (30:30)*

[2] For example, see the verse 2:62.

[3] For example, see the verse 4:163.

[4] *The same religion has He established for you as that which He enjoined on Noah - the which We have sent by inspiration to thee - and that which We enjoined on Abraham, Moses, and Jesus: Namely, that ye should remain steadfast in religion, and make no divisions therein: to those who worship other things than Allah, hard is the (way) to which thou callest them. Allah chooses to Himself those whom He pleases, and guides to Himself those who turn (to Him). (42:13)*

[5] For example, see the verse 2:23.

[6] Refer to the verse 17:44.

[7] Refer to the verse 50:16.

[8] *Verily Allah will not deal unjustly with man in aught: It is man that wrongs his own soul. (10:44)*

[9] For example, see the verse 29:45.

[10] For example, see the verses 14:35-40.

[11] For example, see the verses 22:27-28.

[12] *They ask thee what they should spend (In charity). Say: Whatever ye spend that is good, is for parents and kindred and orphans and those in want and for wayfarers. And whatever ye do that is good, -(Allah) knoweth it well. (2:215)*

[13] For example, see the verses 2:183-185.

[14] Refer to the verses 37:100-109.

[15] Refer to the verses 24:30-31.

[16] *O ye who believe! stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich or poor: for Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest ye swerve, and if ye distort (justice) or decline to do justice, verily Allah is well- acquainted with all that ye do. (4:135)*

[17] *Serve Allah, and join not any partners with Him; and do good- to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbours who are near, neighbours who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer (ye meet), and what your right hands possess: For Allah loveth not the arrogant, the vainglorious. (4:36)*