

An Introduction to Islam

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by Dr Liyakatali Takim

This text explains some of the basic beliefs and practices of Muslims. It also discusses some controversial issues that are frequently brought up by non-Muslims, like women's rights and the status of Jesus in Islam.

Preface

In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind

We live in one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world. Given the different backgrounds that we come from, there is a great need for tolerance, understanding and respect for such diversity. Above all, we need to be committed to interfaith dialogue.

Islam is one of the great monotheistic religions in the world today. Yet it is also the most misunderstood religion. For a long time, we have felt the need to produce some literature which will explain Islam to non-Muslims and remove the false notions many have about Islam.

This booklet, although brief, explains some of the basic beliefs and practices of Muslims. It also discusses some questions on Islam that we are frequently asked by our many non-Muslim friends. It is hoped that this booklet will inspire the readers to further explore the many dimensions of Islam – one of the great religions of the world.

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Islam

*In the Name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind
May the Peace and Blessings of Allah be upon you.*

Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world. Indeed, one out of every five persons on this earth is a Muslim. There are nearly 6 million Muslims living in North America and the number is growing. Yet, unfortunately, Islam is also the most misunderstood religion. Muslims live in different parts of the world ranging from China to Argentina, Russia to South Africa. The country with the largest Muslim population

is Indonesia.

Islam means the active submission to the one God. It is strictly a monotheistic religion since it restricts worship to the one supreme Lord who is the Originator and Creator of the universe. Peace (the root from which the word Islam is derived) is attained through complete obedience to the commandments of God, for God is the source of all peace.

Muslims are those who believe in one God and in Muhammad as the final Prophet of God. They devote their lives to the service of God, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe.

Islam teaches that God (called **Allah** in Arabic) is the source of all creation and that human beings are the best of His creation. He communicates by inspiring them towards goodness and by sending Prophets who deliver God's message. Muslims believe that the first Prophet was Adam followed by a long chain of Prophets to guide humanity.

The Qur'an, according to Muslim belief, is the word of God revealed to Prophet Muhammad. It mentions many other Prophets like Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Moses, Jacob, Joseph and Jesus. All the Prophets had brought the same message, i.e., belief in one God, upright human conduct and belief in the accountability of human acts at the end of time.

Jesus in Islam

Muslims respect and venerate Jesus Christ. They consider him to be one of God's greatest messengers to humankind. The Qur'an re-affirms his miraculous birth and his miraculous abilities. Furthermore, his mother Mary is regarded as one of the most pure and exalted women of all creation. As the Qur'an says:

“Behold! the angel said: 'God has chosen you and purified you and has chosen you above the women of all nations. O Mary! God gives you the good news of a word from Him, whose name shall be Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, honored in this world and the hereafter, and one of those brought near to God” (3:42).

Islam regards its teachings to be a re-affirmation and culmination of the teachings of previous monotheistic religions like Judaism and Christianity. Hence, all Muslims believe in Moses and Jesus as Prophets of God. Prophet Muhammad was commanded to recite in the Qur'an:

***“Say, we believe in God
and that which was revealed unto us,
and that which was revealed unto Abraham and Ishmael
and Isaac and Jacob, and the tribes
and that which was entrusted unto Moses and Jesus
and the Prophets from their Lord
We make no distinction between any of them***

and unto Him we have submitted” (3:84).

Islam is the final religion revealed to human beings through the last Prophet who was called Muhammad. He was born in Mecca (in Saudi Arabia) in the year 570 A.D. Muhammad was a very truthful and honest person. He was also very pious and detested the moral decadence of his society.

At the age of forty, God asked him, through the angel Gabriel, to proclaim the religion of Islam publicly. God's message to humanity was delivered in the Qur'an which was revealed to Muhammad.

The Qur'an, which is the holy book for Muslims, contains 114 chapters (called *Suras*). Muslims believe that it is the pure word of God, unadulterated over 14 centuries. It deals with issues which affect human beings in their earthly lives; issues like piety, upright human conduct, worship, the creation of a just and virtuous society and the practice of ethics.

Islam has two major schools of thought – the Shi'i and the Sunni. The Sunnis believe that the community selected its own leader after Prophet Muhammad's death whereas the Shi'as believe that the Prophet had, by divine will, appointed 'Ali to be his successor. Leadership is thus divinely designated. It is to be noted that both the Sunnis and the Shi'as are united in their major beliefs i.e., they believe in the same God, the same book, the same Prophets and pray in the same direction. The differences are mainly theological and jurisprudential.

The Teachings of Islam

Islam teaches that human beings are born pure and sinless. No one is responsible for or can take the responsibility of the sins of others. However, the doors of forgiveness are always open for those who repent sincerely. God continuously reminds us in the Qur'an of His infinite mercy and compassion. Muslims are enjoined to maintain inner spiritual purity through constant remembrance and prayer to God.

Islam balances the spiritual dimension by emphasizing human responsibility. Human beings are created with a purpose. Attainment of piety is but one dimension of such purpose; playing an active role in the creation of a just society is another. Because Muslims attach importance to what happens in this world, they have made substantial contribution to the development of science, medicine, mathematics, physics, astronomy, geography and literature.

Muslims like Avicenna (Abu Ali al-Husain ibn-Sina, 980–1037) and Averroes (Abul Walid Mohammad Ibn Rushd, 1126–1198) have played major roles in the advancement of science in the west. The first university in the world was established by Muslims in Cairo, Egypt. Many crucial systems such as the Arabic numerals, algebra, the first map of the globe and navigational maps were developed by Muslims and adopted by the medieval Europeans.

Apart from human responsibility, Islam also teaches human accountability. The final destination of

human beings is the hereafter. Muslims believe that, at the end of time, all human beings will be resurrected to account for their deeds. Those who have performed righteous deeds will be rewarded with eternal bliss in heaven and those who have performed evil acts will be punished in hell.

Muslim Practice

Salat (Prayers)

Islam demands from its adherents that beliefs be supplemented with actions. Just as God communicates with us, we need to respond to Him by undertaking certain spiritual and social duties which will draw us closer to Him. Human beings can communicate directly with God through prayers.

Although they can pray anywhere, Muslims are encouraged to pray in congregation. Muslims are required to pray five times every day. Prayers are offered in Arabic. Personal supplication may be recited in any language in the pursuit of closeness to the Lord. Prayers engender inner strength and inspire one to a closer relationship with the Creator. Muslims pray towards the **Ka'ba**, which is situated in Mecca. It was built by Abraham and Ishmael over four thousand years ago.

Sawm (Fasting)

Discipline in a believer is further inculcated by fasting. Every year in the month of Ramadhan, Muslims must fast by refraining from food and drink during the day time. Fasting is regarded as an essential component in the growth of spirituality within a person. It also makes a person more aware of the plight of the poor and helps him develop willpower so as to discipline his desires.

Since Islam believes in values like chastity and morality, it prohibits all acts which lead to moral corruption. Drugs, alcohol and substance abuse are strictly prohibited in Islam.

Zakat (Alms)

Muslims see wealth to be a trust from God, to be dispensed in His way. Therefore, they are asked to purify their wealth by spending a portion of their income for those in need (called **zakat**). Giving the **zakat** is seen as one of the most meritorious deeds especially as it helps fulfill the Islamic vision of creating a just and equitable society. Undertaking social responsibility by helping the needy is highly encouraged in Islam.

Hajj (Pilgrimage)

Once in their lifetime, Muslims are commanded to go for pilgrimage to Mecca provided there are no financial or physical constraints. Every year, about two million Muslims from different parts of the world converge on Mecca to perform the pilgrimage. This provides a unique opportunity for Muslims of different nations and diverse backgrounds to meet one another. During the rituals, pilgrims wear white

clothes and stand close together in the worship of the one Lord. Islam recognizes no racial or ethnic boundaries. The **hajj** is the perfect example of the oneness of people of all races and nations, worshipping and serving the Lord.

The **hajj** is marked by the **Eid al-Adha**, a festival which is marked with prayers and other rituals performed by the pilgrims in the vicinity of Mecca. These rituals are meant to purify the faithful inwardly. The day is also marked in Muslim communities in different parts of the world with celebrations and exchange of gifts. This day, together with the **Eid al-Fitr**, a feast day commemorating the end of **Ramadhan**, are the two main festivals of the Muslim calendar. The Muslim weekly holiday is on Fridays when congregational prayers are held at noon.

Islam and War

The concept of **jihad** (wrongly translated as holy war) refers to the duty of Muslims to defend their faith and the welfare of the Muslim community when threatened. The Qur'an does not permit aggression against anyone and Prophet Muhammad is asked to proselytize in a peaceful manner. Warfare is permitted only in self-defence. However, it must be noted that people only resort to violence when their basic human rights are violated and when all attempts at peaceful settlement are thwarted.

Islam and Human Rights

Islam teaches that human beings have a moral obligation to live in harmony with one another. Islam also recognizes and accords rights to all human beings regardless of race, color or creed. Islam requires its followers to show respect and tolerance even to those who do not share their faith. Prophet Muhammad said: *"God has no mercy on one who shows no mercy to others"*.

Freedom of conscience is guaranteed by the Qur'an itself. It states:

"There is no compulsion in religion" (2:256).

Islamic law stipulates that Muslims should protect the status of minorities. Therefore the life and property of all citizens in an Islamic state are considered sacred, whether a person is a Muslim or not. Because of this, non-Muslim places of worship have survived and flourished all over the Muslim world. Islam further encourages Muslims to respect the rights of all living things. Therefore, Muslims are required to be conscious of the environment and are not allowed to cause harm to nature.

It is important to realize that far from being extremists and fanatics, Muslims are peaceful and law abiding citizens of the countries in which they live. This stance is derived directly from the Qur'an which states:

"O human beings, We have created you from one male and female (Adam & Eve), We have created you as different tribes and nations so that you may know each other" (49: 13).

Islam and Women

Muslim women have all the rights of their male counterparts. Islam granted full rights to women fourteen hundred years ago. Muslim women may own and dispose property; they may work, exercise voting powers and exercise other rights which women in other cultures enjoy. Muslim women may not be forced to marry against their will.

To preserve chastity, respect and moral values in society, Muslim men and women are required to dress in a manner which is considered modest and dignified. Women are asked to cover their hair and wear loose clothings. The diversity of female dress in some Muslim countries is often the expression of local customs.

Since Islam is a universal religion, it is easy to become a Muslim. One has to believe and affirm that **“There is no god but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God”**.

Today, the Islamic community in North America is growing rapidly with Muslims playing major roles in virtually all sectors of society. Muhammad Ali (formerly Cassius Clay), Malcolm X, Yusuf Islam (formerly Cat Stevens) are some of the well-known people who have embraced Islam.

May the blessings of the Almighty God be with you!

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