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A Concise Introduction to Islam

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(ENS) "Islam" is derived from the Arabic root *salaama* meaning peace, purity, submission and obedience. Islam stands for making peace by submitting to the will of God and obeying His law. Jews and Christians view Islam as the latest of the world's great religions. However, worldwide Muslims (sometimes written "Moslems") understand their universal religion as the "final religion" and the "primal religion."

As "final," Islam is God's final revelation of prophetic religion, in fulfillment of all that had preceded. Moses was given the Law; David was given the Psalms; Jesus was given the Gospel. Judaism offers God's message of justice, and Christianity proclaims the love of God. To Mohammed (570-632 A.D.; spelled in a variety of ways) the God of Abraham and Jesus revealed the Qur'an (Arabic for "recital," sometimes written Koran). The *Qur'an*, written in Arabic, is the Sacred Scripture of Islam, the perfection of all previous divine revelations, and is to be understood literally as the direct words of God. In this sense of scriptural literalism, all Muslims may be called "fundamentalists." However, when referring to the aggressive behaviors of a few, "militants" and "extremists" are better categories.

Muslims believe in all prophets of the Bible. The Qur'an itself mentions the Torah and the Gospel as scriptures revealed by God to Moses and Jesus. However, the Qur'an indicates that over time, changes were made to the actual biblical texts, because of commentary blended with the original text, as well as losses to the texts through transmission and other causes. For these reasons, Muslims cannot rely absolutely on the Torah and Gospels as sources of revelation, unless they confirm what is in the Qur'an or at least are in harmony with it.

As "Seal of the Prophets" and apostle of Allah (which means "the God" in Arabic), Mohammed is neither divine nor the focal point of Islam; therefore, the religion should not be called Mohammedanism. For the one billion or more Muslims (about six million in the United States), who are of many racial and ethnic backgrounds--Arabs being a minority--Islam is the middle way between Judaism and Christianity; it restores the unity of the children of Abraham and overcomes the limitations of Judaism and Christianity. Jesus, the prophet to "the lost sheep of Israel," limits Christianity; Judaism is similarly limited. Islam proclaims a practical synthesis of Judaism and Christianity for all humanity. Overcoming the incompleteness of the justice of Judaism and the idealistic love of Christianity, Islam brings to fulfillment all that Judaism and Christianity anticipated. For the Muslim believer, Islam is perfected Judaism and perfected Christianity.

As "primal," Islam is the authentic religion of Adam, of Abraham, and of human nature. Islam is not younger than Judaism and Christianity; it preceded both. Not only is it the religion of the "Spoken Book" (the *Qur'an*), it is as well the religion of the "Created Book" (the fabric of the universe itself). According to the Muslim faith, every person is born a Muslim, and distortions of one's environment lead a person astray to become a Christian, a Jew, or an unbeliever. To be human means to be Muslim.

Beliefs

The doctrines underlying Islam include (1) belief in the God of Abraham, Jesus, and Mohammed; (2) belief in the Qur'an, which is verbally infallible. According to the account, the angel Gabriel appeared and revealed to Mohammed the contents of this sacred book over several years. (3) belief in the prophets of Allah, of whom Mohammed is the last and greatest and the one commissioned to deliver Allah's message to humanity.



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Abraham, Moses, and Jesus of Nazareth also are recognized prophets. Moreover, in the Qur'an Jesus is recognized as the Messiah, and Mary is highly respected. (4) Belief in an afterlife when all people will be judged for their deeds and brought to heaven or condemned to hell.

Islam also teaches that peace should be established in the human societies of this world. To participate with God in the establishment of peace, Muslims are called upon to be engaged in *jihad*, meaning "striving." The basic *jihad* is the struggle of the self, to speak about one's faith, to bring it in obedience to God, and to make sure that one is living a holy and righteous life. Another struggle is *jihad* as "holy war" fought only when the faith is being attacked or when Muslims are not allowed to practice their faith. Very few Muslims call for the "*jihad* of the sword" even in circumstances they believe to be wrongful.

The *ummah*, or Islamic community or state, is the vibrant avenue for the realization of God's Will and should serve as an example to the rest of the world. In Islamic social theory, the *ummah* is formed from the threefold consensus of its members: consensus of the mind, consensus of the heart, and consensus of arms. The *ummah* is formed from the consensus of minds in that all the members of the society share the same view of reality. It is formed from the consensus of hearts in that all members hold the same values. It is formed from the consensus of arms in that all members exert themselves to actualize their values. The Qur'an states plainly that the *ummah* is the preeminent of all human communities given to mankind by God.

Practices

The "Five Pillars of Islam" (obligations or duties) are 1) the confession of faith: "There is no God but God, and Mohammed is his messenger"; 2) prayer five times a day; 3) sharing of wealth or almsgiving, practiced in a variety of ways; 4) fasting for reflection and self-discipline during the month of Ramadan; and 5) pilgrimage to Mecca, at least once in one's lifetime, if possible.

Although there are no clergy as such, a clerical class of religious scholars and local religious leaders evolved. Muslims are called to prayer five times each day, and on Friday it is preferred that the noon prayer be said in a mosque (a place of gathering).

Shi'ites and Sunnis

After Mohammed died, a division arose over succession to the Prophet. This resulted in the emergence of the Sunnis--now constituting about 90 percent of all Muslims--who consider themselves the orthodox branch of Islam. The other group, the Shi'ites, who primarily live in Iran, also consider themselves as authentic Muslims. Sunnis and Shi'ites differ on the issue of succession and in some of their interpretations of the Shari'ah (the straight path), a comprehensive code of morality and religious duties based on the Qur'an and the Hadith (traditions of the prophet's words and deeds).

Characteristics of Shi'ite Islam include a tradition of honorable martyrdom and, in times of crisis, the need to employ strong action, including holy war. According to Shi'ite beliefs, the government of a nation should be a theocracy--a government ruled by God through the Imam (a special spiritual leader). As with any group, Shi'ites include moderates and extremists.

Contemporary Islamic Issues

Issues facing Muslims on a global basis are of a practical nature and have to do with Muslim society. Philosophical and theological concerns continue to be of secondary importance, for the faith has already been delivered in final form. However, there is conflict between traditionalists and modernists.

Traditionalists are committed to the original beliefs and practices of Islam, including faithfulness to a literal understanding of Qur'anic law and its applications to contemporary life. Modernists believe that the principles, goals, and fundamental purposes of religious law are unchanging, but the specific forms in which the eternal truths are expressed must change constantly in the face of changing human circumstances.

Muslim leaders are divided over national loyalties. As a result of colonialism, the Muslim world has broken into many nation states. Some leaders approve of this development, but others fear that the unifying spirit of Islam is betrayed by political nationalism. Although it has had no centralized authority for centuries, Islam has retained a remarkable spirit of unity. With the emerging variety of political structures in the Muslim world, however, some believers--probably a minority--would prefer a more centralized leadership for religious unity. Others believe that God alone should rule without any earthly mediating authority.

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