

Islam – An Overview

Origins

In the beginning when God (or 'Allah' in Arabic) had created the Universe, He created the first man, Adam (peace be upon him (pbuh)) from Clay and breathed into him His Breath. And God commanded that all (angels and others) should bow down to Adam (pbuh), and all did, except Iblees. Iblees was not an angel but was from the Jinn, a supernatural creation of God made from Fire, also given the ability to think and make decisions of right and wrong, but as physical creatures invisible to man. Iblees arrogantly defied God and exclaimed 'I am better than he, I am from Fire and he is from Clay'. And so the first sin, the most heinous sin in Islam, of arrogance, thinking oneself higher (and looking down upon the creation of God) was recorded. Iblees requested from God:

"Allow me respite 'til the Day they (mankind) are raised up...
I will sit in wait against them on Your Straight Path. Then I will come to them from before them and behind them, from their right and from their left, and You will not find most of them as thankful ones." (Qur'an 7:14 - 17)

And so the Devil or Shaytaan was born. The battle had begun.

God created the first woman; Eve (Hawa, peace be upon her) and together Adam and Eve (peace be upon them) dwelt in tranquillity in Heaven. However Iblees, using his wiles, tempted both Adam and Eve to disobey God and eat from the forbidden fruit tree. Both succumbed and both later stood humbly before God in repentance. Both were forgiven for their mistake, and sent down to the Earth to live there, them and their progeny, mankind, for an appointed time, until the End of Days.

Prophets sent to guide humanity

Over the centuries and the millennia that followed, the population of people on earth grew and different nations, languages and cultures were created. And throughout all this time God kept His promise and sent to every nation and community, from the Aborigines to the Eskimos, a Prophet, warning their people of their unjust practices, of the whisperings of Shaytaan in each and every person and guiding them to what would give them strength to combat their temptations and bring them inner peace, the wonderful worship of One God. The Prophets were righteous examples for their respective peoples; glowing lamps of nur (light) amidst the darkness of the world. Their way from day one was Peace emanating from the complete submission to the Will of the Creator; a meaning encompassed by one word, 'Islam'.

This line of Prophethood began with Adam (pbuh) and included people of great courage and character, who spent nights crying unto their Lord, and who spread justice and compassion wherever they went. Yes, this list is huge, yes, they were great people, but among this list were a few absolutely outstanding individuals: Noah (Nuh, pbuh) who for so many years struggled to bring his people to the worship of One God; Abraham (Ibraheem, pbuh), the 'Friend of God', who was the father of the semitic people, the Jewish and Arab nations, and among whose offspring were numbered many prophets; Moses (Musa, pbuh) to whom God spoke through the burning bush; King David (Da 'ud, pbuh) whose beautiful voice lifted up to the skies the words of worship of God; John (Yahya, pbuh) who was beheaded for his conviction and belief; and of course the beloved Jesus (Eesa, pbuh), the 'Word from God', the Prophet born without a father, the healer of lepers, the one who brought people back from the dead, the one who suffered at the hands of the Pharisees and the Romans, and the only Prophet who was physically lifted up to the Heavens and who will descend eventually in the future as a sign of the End of Days.

These Prophets had been divinely inspired to move among the people, to say and do what He, The Creator and Sustainer, wanted them to. Muslims believe, contrary to Christians and Jews, that these Prophets had characters that made them strong enough to combat and overcome the temptations that Shaytaan sent their way for they were the guides and role-models that God had chosen and He had chosen them above all people. They were truly the best of mankind. Some of them had been sent special revelation from Him, His direct Words that they heard through the Angel Gabriel (Jibreel, pbuh), and that they relayed verbatim to their people, without addition or subtraction. Special names have been given to these revelations, these miracles from God, these bursts of Light emanating from Him: the Torah of Moses (pbuh); the Psalms (or Zabur) of David (pbuh); and the Good News (or Injeel) of Jesus (pbuh).

But all these wonderful words of inspiration were not written down verbatim, some were forgotten by the subsequent followers of these Prophets, some became jumbled up with other words, some people tried to remember years after the Prophets had gone, some were lost in translations into other languages. Eventually some of these writings found their way into scriptures of religions. And Muslims still greatly value the wonderful glimmers of reflection of that beautiful Light from time ago, when they read these scriptures.

God had ensured that mankind was consistently guided by the advent of Prophet after Prophet, but the time in history was now ready, technologies and cultures were now able to record accurately for posterity, and so the 6th century saw God unfold the last of His revelations, the one which would be, as was His will, recorded verbatim and so accurately that it would stand the test of time. And the Prophet he chose for this final Chapter was the one endowed with the most beautiful character, with the compassion and kindness, strength of conviction and courage and perseverance befitting the greatest man God had ever created: Muhammad (pbuh). The line of Prophethood ended with the advent of Prophet Muhammad (570 - 632CE), hence his title 'the Seal of the Prophets'.

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)

He was born in the Arabian city of Makka and began receiving revelations from God via the Angel Gabriel, from the age of 40. These revelations, the direct word of God, the same who spoke to Moses and Jesus, continued for almost 23 years until the Prophet's death, and form collectively 'the Qur'an'. For this, he and his early followers were persecuted: some of these early Muslims were crucified, others were tortured in the desert heat, some were made prisoner in their own homes by their families, he himself was mocked, spat at, and there were three attempts to assassinate him. His wife died just after they and his followers were allowed to return after they had been boycotted and removed from the city for almost three years. Eventually he and his followers fled to the city of Yathrib (renamed Medina tun Nabi, the 'City of the Prophet'), where he forged the first Muslim community and laid down the foundations of an Islamic state. Even here the Arab idolaters would not let him alone and there were three battles where they tried to wipe this religion out, but he persevered and the faith grew. At the age of sixty-three the Prophet (pbuh) passed away in Medina.

A role model for the Muslims

He is described as having the best of character because he was the epitome of good manners, kind, caring and considerate. He was pleasant and humorous showing love to all those around him. He told his followers that "none of you will attain (perfect) faith until you love for your brother/sister what you love for yourself".

The Prophet (pbuh) is often described as the 'walking/talking Quran'. Indeed the Quran, states "You have an excellent role model in the Messenger of Allah, particularly for anyone who longs for Allah and the Last Day and remembers Him abundantly"(33:21).

The Prophet was not interested in the material pleasures of this world, he shunned wealth, preferring to give away everything he received. He wore very simple clothes, a few outfits which he would mend himself, shoes which he cobbled himself. He ate most frugally, but he prayed most prolifically. He engaged in this world, and yet he remained unattached to it, unaffected by its lure

After him the religion and its simple creed conquered the hearts and minds of millions. Still to this day it is the fastest growing religion in the world.

What non –Muslims say about the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)

"My choice of Muhammad to lead the list of the world's most influential persons may surprise some readers and may be questioned by others, but he was the only man in history who was supremely successful on both the religious and secular level."

[Michael H. Hart *The 100: A Ranking Of The Most Influential Persons In History*, New York, 1978, p. 33]

"His readiness to undergo persecutions for his beliefs, the high moral character of the men who believed in him and looked up to him as leader, and the greatness of his ultimate achievement - all argue his fundamental integrity. To suppose Muhammad an impostor raises more problems than it solves. Moreover, none of the great figures of history is so poorly appreciated in the West as Muhammad."

[William Montgomery Watt - *Mohammad At Mecca*, Oxford, 1953, p. 52]

"Philosopher, orator, apostle, legislator, warrior, conqueror of ideas, restorer of rational dogmas, of a cult without images; the founder of twenty terrestrial empires and of one spiritual empire, that is Muhammad. As regards all standards by which human greatness may be measured, we may well ask, is there any man greater than he?"

[Alphonse de Lamartine Translated from *Histoire De La Turquie*, Paris, 1854, vol. II, pp. 276-277]

"... he was Caesar and Pope in one; but he was Pope without the Pope's pretensions, and Caesar without the legions of Caesar. Without a standing army, without a bodyguard, without a palace, without a fixed revenue, if ever any man had the right to say that he ruled by a right Divine, it was Mohammed; for he had all the power without its instruments and without its supports."

[Reverend Bosworth Smith *Mohammed and Mohammedanism*, London, 1874, p. 235]

"...I became more than ever convinced that it was not the sword that won a place for Islam in those days in the scheme of life. It was the rigid simplicity, the utter self-effacement of the prophet, the scrupulous regard for his pledges, his intense devotion to his friends and

followers, his intrepidity, his fearlessness, his absolute trust in God and in his own mission. These, and not the sword carried everything before them and surmounted every trouble."

[Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi *Young India* (periodical), 1928, Volume X]

"The greatest success of Mohammad's life was effected by sheer moral force without the stroke of a sword."

[Edward Gibbon *History Of The Saracen Empire*, London, 1870]

Teachings

Islam is the religion of the Unity/Oneness of God and tolerance towards all mankind. As such, Islam stands for purity, and the word means 'peace' and 'complete submission to the will of God'. A Muslim is one who submits to God's Will and sincerely professes the Declaration of Faith (Shahadah):

"I bear witness that there is none worthy of worship except God and I bear witness that Muhammad is His Servant and Messenger."

By stating this he or she is also accepting the complete line of the Prophets that came before.

Scriptures – Quran and Sunnah

Islam has its primary source of teaching and law in the Qur'an. This is the actual Message of God giving His final statement on the meaning, purpose and conduct of human existence. A second source of Islamic teaching and law is the Hadith or Sunnah. Whatever the Prophet (pbuh) said, did, approved or disapproved of was preserved first orally, then in writing, in a body of works called 'Hadith' (report) and these books form another major source of guidance for Muslims.

Islamic faith, worship, religious requirements and daily life are enunciated and regulated by sacred laws, called the Shariah that are based on the Qur'an and Sunnah.

The Oneness of God

The most important truth that God revealed to mankind is that there is nothing divine or worthy of being worshipped except Almighty God, thus all human beings should submit to Him. God is absolutely One and His Oneness should never be compromised by associating partners with Him _neither in worship nor in belief. Due to this, Muslims are required to maintain a direct relationship with God.

The Nature of God

In short, in the Islamic concept of God, which is completely based on Divine Revelation, there is no ambiguity in divinity - God is God and man is man. Islam teaches that God has a unique nature and that He is free from gender, human weaknesses and beyond anything which human beings can imagine. The Qur'an teaches that the signs and proofs of God's wisdom, power and existence are evident in the world around us. As such, God calls on man to ponder over the creation in order to build a better understanding of his Creator. Muslims believe that

God is Loving, Compassionate and Merciful, these being three of the ninety-nine names that Muslims are taught to seek out and glorify Him with. But according to Islam, it is not enough that people believe that "God is One", but they must actualise this belief by proper conduct.

The purpose of life

In the Holy Qur'an, God teaches human beings that they were created in order to worship Him, and that the basis of all true worship is God-consciousness. The teachings of Islam act as a mercy and a healing for the human soul and such qualities as humility, sincerity, patience and charity are essential.

Additionally, Islam condemns pride and self-righteousness, since God is the only One who knows what is in the hearts of man and so is the only judge of human righteousness. Human beings are not believed to be inherently sinful, but are seen as equally capable of both good and evil.

Islam also teaches that faith and action go hand-in-hand. God has given people free-will, and the measure of one's faith is one's deeds and actions as long as they are with pure intentions. However, human beings have also been created weak and regularly fall into sin. This is the nature of the human being as created by God in His Wisdom, and it is not inherently "corrupt". This is because the avenue of repentance is always open to all human beings, and Almighty God loves the repentant sinner. The true balance of an Islamic life is established by having a healthy 'fear' or 'awe' of God as well as a sincere belief in His infinite Love and Mercy.

Judgement day

Muslims believe that all human beings will ultimately be judged by God for their beliefs and actions in their earthly lives. In judging human beings, God will be both Merciful and Just, and people will only be judged for what they were capable of. Suffice it to say that Islam teaches that life is a test, and that all human beings will be accountable before God. A sincere belief in the life hereafter is key to leading a well-balanced and moral life on Earth.

Islam teaches that true happiness can only be obtained by living a life full of God-consciousness and being satisfied with what God has given us. Additionally, true "freedom" is freedom from being controlled by our base human desires and being ruled by man-made ideologies. A direct and clear relationship with God, as well as the sense of purpose and belonging that one feels as a Muslim, frees a person from the many worries of everyday life.

Worship

Worship in Islam has a very wide scope that could be private or communal. Much of this is encapsulated in the Five Pillars of Islam (the basic statutory obligations to God):

Shahadah

Sincere faith from the heart and verbal testimony that there is none worthy of worship except God and that Muhammad (pbuh) is His Messenger.

Salah

Praying the five compulsory prayers a day; before sunrise, noon, late afternoon, sunset and late evening is obligatory for all Muslim adults. Obligatory ritual washing precedes prayer. Preferably prayer will be performed in congregation in the Mosque led by the Imam, but when

this is not possible a Muslim can pray almost anywhere, wherever it is clean and quiet. During prayer, Muslims face towards the Kaabah situated in the city of Makkah (Saudi Arabia), which from Britain is generally in the Southeast direction. Friday is the main day of gathering for Muslims and is obligatory for every adult Muslim male, but only optional for women, this being among some of the relaxed rulings regarding women and their elevated position.

Zakah

A specific, annual, obligatory contribution that is to be used primarily for the poor and needy. It is calculated as 2.5% of savings (over and above one's essential needs) after a period of one year.

Sawm

Fasting during the month of Ramadhan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. Muslims abstain totally from eating, drinking, smoking and sexual relations between dawn and sunset. Fasting during this month is incumbent upon every adult Muslim who is fit to do so. To allow ease Islamic Shariah has exemptions for people who are sick, frail, mentally unstable or travelling. Women who are pregnant or nursing mothers or on their periods are also exempted from fasting. Alongside the physical abstentions, the spirit of Ramadhan lies in engendering goodness of character and fighting against one's bad traits.

Hajj

Pilgrimage to Makkah. All Muslims who can afford to do so must make this pilgrimage once in a lifetime.

The most crucial aspect to the whole of worship is intention and sincerity. The Prophet (pbuh) remarked. "All actions will be judged by their intentions." Hence any action with the intention of seeking the pleasure of God, or done through love for Him, will be deemed worship.

Places of Worship

The mosque, or more appropriately the 'masjid' (meaning 'place of prostration') is devoted to the remembrance of God. This may include public meetings of benefit to the community, religious classes, ceremonies etc. Islam does not have the concept of consecrated or hallowed ground. The Prophet (pbuh) reiterated this when he said the whole of the earth is a masjid. Upon entering a masjid, shoes are removed to observe the purity of the masjid and modest clothing should be worn as a sign of respect. Every single human being is welcome into any masjid, it being designated as the place of worship to God, and God welcomes everyone of His creation.

Practices

Birth

Muslims believe that the first words a baby should hear upon entering the world are the words of God, hence the Adhan, or the first call to prayer, is recited gently into the right ear of the baby and the Iqamah, or the second call to prayer, into the left ear. In the hope that the baby will have a 'sweet character', tradition states that something sweet is placed in the mouth of the baby, usually a tiny slither of a date or a drop of honey. The baby's hair is also shaved off in the first few days and the equivalent in weight of either gold or silver is donated as charity to thank God for the blessing He has bestowed. Also to show gratefulness on this joyous occasion, Muslims perform the Aqiqah ceremony, where they sacrifice an animal and distribute some of the meat to the needy. Muslims also circumcise boys, following the custom and tradition begun by Prophet Abraham (pbuh).

Marriage

Islam places a very strong emphasis on the institution of marriage and family life. Marriage is a statutory civil contract, a mutual agreement, made between the man and the woman before God and witnessed by Muslims. Strict codes of sexual morality and modesty are essential for the protection of the family and community. The sexes are, therefore, often segregated after puberty. Islam does not call for suppression of sexual desire, but strongly encourages marriage.

Funerals

When death is imminent, family members, or the Muslim leader, will simply recite verses from the Qur'an by the bedside of the dying person; who if possible will repeat the Shahadah. Upon death and the washing and shrouding of the body, funeral prayers are held, and the body is buried. It is highly encouraged to do all of this as soon as possible. Cremation is forbidden for Muslims. A period of mourning follows, traditionally for a period of up to three days. Death is seen as a transition from one life to another.

Diet

Muslims are only allowed to eat halal food. The term 'halal' is defined as that which is permissible under Islamic Law. In the context of meat this means those animals that are permitted to be eaten and which have been slaughtered according to Islamic Law, namely that God's name is stated and blood is drained and the meat is healthy and hygienic. In particular, halal food must be free from any product or by-product derived from pigs, e.g. pork, bacon, ham; and also from alcohol. The term 'haram' defines all that is not permitted under Islamic Law. However, in places where halal meat is not available, the meat of the Jews and Christians, slaughtered according to their religious rules, is allowable to Muslims.

Dress

There are no general requirements as to the dress except that for a man the area between the navel and the knees must be covered. In addition the majority of Muslim men prefer to cover their heads. For a woman, everything except her hands, feet and face must be covered. A woman therefore must have her head covered (hijab) and wear modest clothing that do not reveal the features of the body when out of her home or in front of men who are not close family.

Religious Books and Artefacts

The Qur'an is the most sacred book for Muslims, because it is God's word. Muslims treat the Qur'an with great reverence. Additional source of guidance is found in Hadith (traditions) containing words of advice and acts (Sunnah) of the Prophet (pbuh). Many Muslims will have prayer mats to pray on, although others will take shoes off before entering their homes, so as to keep the place clean and hence be able to pray anywhere. Rosary beads called tasbees are often used to aid in reciting God's praise.

Rites and Initiation

There are no set rites or initiation ceremonies in Islam. However at puberty the Muslim individual enters the adult world, ceases to be a child and becomes accountable for his/her actions.

Festivals and Celebrations

The Islamic calendar has 12 months and is based on the lunar year. The start dates of the holy month of Ramadhan therefore and festivals are subject to the sighting of the new moon. This also means that Muslim festivals fall about eleven days earlier each year.

Eid-ul-Fitr

1st Shawwal (10th month)

Celebration of the ending of the month of Ramadan
(fasting period)

Eid-ul-Adha

10th Dhul Hijjah (12th month) Muslims remember Prophet Abraham's (pbuh) acceptance of the Divine command to sacrifice his son Ismail (pbuh)

Shab-e-Barat

Night of 15th Shaban (8th month) Change of direction of Qibla (direction of prayer) from Palestine to Makkah and also the Night of Forgiveness

Laylat-ul-Qadr

Night of 27th Ramadhan (9th month) The Night of Power when Muslims believe the Qur'an was first revealed

Milad-un-Nabi

12th Rabi ul Awwal (3rd month)

Birthday of Prophet Mohammed (pbuh)

Ashura

9th / 10th Muharram (1st month) Anniversary of the day Prophet Moses (pbuh) and the Children of Israel were liberated from the tyranny of Pharaoh. It also coincides with the day on which Prophet Mohammad's grandson Hussain (pbuh) was martyred. This has greater significance for Shi'a Muslims.

Community

There is no ordained priesthood or centralised hierarchy in the religion of Islam. All Muslims accept at the basic level that the individual's bond with God is direct and an intermediary is not necessary. Most masjids will have an Imam in charge, responsible for leading prayers and teaching and performing religious functions. However, any Muslim who is capable of doing so can lead the prayers. Muslims believe that all human beings are of one family since we are all children of Adam and Eve (peace be upon them). We are all therefore 'brothers and sisters'.

Muslims also believe that Jews and Christians are singled out as a special group of people, the Ahlel Kitab, or People of the Book, in that they worship the same God, were sent previous Revelations, and hence share many of the same stories of the Prophets. In addition Muslims can be grouped into a distinct category called 'Ummah' or community. Upon declaring the Shahadah, the new convert becomes a member of this Ummah.

Different Schools

The majority (85%) of the world's Muslims belong to the Sunni school of thought with the largest minority being Shi'i Muslims. The Shi'i differ with their Sunni brethren on the question

of the succession to the Prophet (pbuh), maintaining that Imam Ali (pbuh), the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, was appointed by the Prophet by divine command to succeed him.

The Sunni world is also further divided into four schools of jurisprudence: Hanafi, Shafi, Hanbali and Maliki. These differences are in interpretations and Islamic legal theories which lead to often subtle differences in the practical details of Islamic Law.

In addition there have been differing traditions and movements historically. There are sufi groups, with their spiritual tariqas, which espouse 'ways' by which one gets 'closer' to God. There are traditions based on political movements of the past, and there are reformist traditions.

Despite all the different schools within the Muslim world that exist and have existed, there is one fact worth bearing in mind. By far, most, if not all, accept each other as Muslim and as part of the Ummah. 99% of all that they believe and practice is identical and in terms of fundamental beliefs they are in agreement: there is one God, one Qur'an, there is belief in the prophets, angels, the Day of Judgement, heaven and hell, the five pillars and so on. Hence, historically all have been welcomed to perform the annual Hajj pilgrimage to Makkah, where traditionally only Muslims have been allowed to enter.