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# Islam

*An Introduction to  
Religion, Culture, and History*

James A. Beverley



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

To my brother Bob Beverley  
With much love and admiration

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# Islam

## The Nature of Islam

One out of every six people on earth is Muslim, a follower of Islam, the second largest religion in the world, next to Christianity. Islam has been a religious, cultural, and political force since the seventh century AD. Today it plays a dominant role in the Middle East and large sections of Africa and Asia.

## The Four Foundations of Islam

As in all religions, Islam has a core, an essence, a sort of DNA that has defined the religion from the beginning. The best way to begin to grasp this basic and fundamental identity is to recognize four absolutely key realities in the faith of all Muslims. These keys to understanding the Muslim faith are the same for all groups within Islam.

### *Allah*

What is absolutely primary in Islam is a total belief in Allah (the Arabic term for God that is also used by Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians), Muslims believe with conviction that there is one

supreme creator, an infinite, eternal power who can do all things and knows all things.

According to Muslims, Allah is the perfect, wise, merciful, and just guide who holds all humans accountable for their deeds, both good and bad. All of this is captured in the first verses of the Quran (Koran is the former English term), the Muslim scripture. "In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds." (1:1-2). It continues: "Master of the Day of Judgment. You do we worship, and Your aid we seek. Show us the straight way" (1:4-6).

### *Muhammad*

Muslims also believe that Allah has spoken to the world through Muhammad, the seal (final and greatest) Prophet. The vast majority of Muslims believe that Muhammad (who died in AD 632) was sinless. Every area of Islamic life is patterned after what Muhammad taught, what he did, how he dressed, how he responded to threats, and what he said had been revealed to him by Allah.

The reverence and adulation of Muhammad is hard to overstate, though Muslims do not believe he was divine. However, those who cast aspersions on the prophet are in extreme danger, as Salman Rushdie, the Indian-born Muslim, discovered when he wrote *The Satanic Verses*. The Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini issued a death order on him because he thought Rushdie had slandered Muhammad.

### *Quran*

Further, the Quran is absolutely fundamental to all Muslims. This is the Holy Book. Muslims believe the Quran was revealed to Muhammad and is the *literal*, actual Word of Allah. It should be recited in Arabic, the original language, should be memorized and studied, but never questioned as an ultimate source of authority.

Islamic views on everything are determined by what the Quran says or by what can be deduced from its general teachings. Thus, polygamy is acceptable to Muslims because the Quran says so. Some Muslim's believe women must be veiled because of an interpretation of one passage that demands modesty. In some countries with Islamic law the hand of a thief is amputated because the Quran says this is to be the punishment. Muslims have certain views about Jesus because of teachings in the Quran.

### *Law*

Islam is also a religion of law. While every faith has general principles, some groups like Orthodox Judaism and Roman Catholicism have elaborate rules. In Islam, Shariah (SHAR rih ah) law extends to every area of life, including how Muslim nations are to obey God's will.

The history of Islamic jurisprudence is very long and complicated, especially after Islam experienced a serious division following the death of Muhammad. Basically, Islamic law is derived first from the Quran, and then from the example (sunnah) of Muhammad. When neither the Quran nor the Prophet's life and teachings speak directly on issues, most Muslim legal authorities depend on reason and consensus to formulate either new laws or judgments based on the massive codes of law given in the three centuries after Muhammad's death.

The scope of shariah law is amazing to most non-Muslims. Consider, for example, some of the matters addressed in Islamic Laws, written by Ayatullah al Uzama Sye Ali-al-Husaini Seestani, a famous judge in Iran. He provides rulings (known as *fatwas*) on thousands of topics, including: (1) what direction should be faced when using the bathroom, (2) when swallowing thick dust makes fasting void, and (3) how much is owed Allah in almsgiving if a Muslim owns sixty-one camels.

## Sunni Schools of Law

School	Founder	% of Muslim world under school
Hanafi	Imam Abu Hanifa (699–767 CE) from Iraq	45%
Shafi'i	Imam al Shafi'i (767–820 CE) from Medina	28%
Maliki	Imam Malik (711–795) CE from Medina	15%
Hanbali	Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal (780–855 CE) from Iraq	2%

## The Five Pillars of Islam

Just as the Ten Commandments shape Judaism, the five pillars of Islam constitute core patterns of faith for most Muslims.

### *Confession*

The primary pillar is a confession of faith known as the *shahadah*, which reads: “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His prophet.” Devout Muslims repeat this statement several times each day.

### *Prayer*

The second pillar involves the discipline of prayer (*salat*) and the call for all Muslims to pray at five specific times every day, facing Mecca, the holiest city. In traditional Islamic cultures, the call to prayer, resounding from the minarets (towers) of the mosques (houses of worship), brings all other activity to a halt.



### *Giving*

This third pillar is known as *zakat*. The *zakat* is collected by a few Muslim states, but most Muslims give through leaving money in the metal *zakat* box in their local mosque. The money is used to help the poor and for emergency situations. The *zakat* involves giving 2.5 percent of a Muslim's assets, but it is not charity since it is an obligatory act, one that is usually to be done in private.

### *Fasting*

Muslims are to intensify their spiritual focus through the fourth pillar *sawm* (fasting), from sunup to sundown during the entire month of Ramadan (the ninth month in the Islamic calendar). Unless prohibited by poor health, Muslims are to abstain from all food, water, and sexual activity from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan. The fast offers a time for spiritual reflection, repentance, and giving to the poor. The whole Quran is often recited in evening worship over the thirty-day period. Ramadan ends with a three-day feast.

### *Pilgrimage*

The fifth pillar, known as the *haji*, is the command for all able-bodied Muslims to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his or her lifetime. Every year 2 million Muslim pilgrims make their way to Mecca. Outside the city both men and women don simple white garments, and enter Mecca while reciting "Here I am at your service, O God, here I am!" They circle seven times around the Kaaba, the temple built by Abraham and Ishma'il. The pilgrims engage in a ritual of running between two mountains outside of Mecca, in memory of the plight of Hagar looking for food and water. Muslims also throw stones at a pillar that symbolizes Satan, and sacrifice animals in memory of the story of Abraham and Isaac.

## Seven Other Major Beliefs

From the aforementioned, we know that all faithful Muslims believe that Allah is the one true God. They also want to emulate Muhammad, obey the Quran, pray, give financially, fast, take the pilgrim's journey to Mecca, and obey the law of God in all things. Beyond these overriding and paramount aspects of Islam, seven other fundamental beliefs help paint an accurate picture.

### *Islam has Existed Since Creation*

Muslims believe that Islam began long before Muhammad. They assert that Islam started when God created Adam and Eve, and that Islam was the religion of faithful Jews and Christians. So, according to Islamic tradition, Moses was a Muslim, and Jesus was too. Younis Shaikh, who taught at a medical college in Pakistan, was arrested in October 2000 for allegedly saying that Muhammad's parents were not Muslims and that Muhammad did not become a Muslim until he was forty.

### *Humans Are Not Born Sinful*

Though Muslim views are similar in some ways to Christian tradition, Muslims do not believe in original sin. This is the concept that all human beings are born with a sinful nature. Muslims do believe that Adam rebelled against God's law in the Garden of Eden, but there was no fall of the human race, as is taught by most Christian groups. Humans are frail and weak, prone to temptation, obviously, but not predisposed toward sin.

### *God is Sovereign*

Muslims believe in the total sovereignty of God. Islam's emphasis on this belief cannot be overstressed. In parts of Afghanistan, goals in soccer games are celebrated by shouting "Allahu akbar" ("God

is great"). When I visited Kenya in 1994, I saw a vivid display of Islamic trust in God as I visited a poor Muslim area. There, on top of the most meager little home you can imagine, the owner had a sign, bigger than his house, proclaiming his faith in the great Allah.

### *Everything is Predestined*

Muslim theologians developed a very rigid doctrine of predestination out of the emphasis on Allah's total supremacy. If God is all knowing and all powerful, He must, in some sense, be responsible for everything. If nothing really deviates from His will, and He knows the future, everything must be predestined—or so it has been argued. Some analysts of Islamic culture believe that a sense of fatalism has emerged as a result of this Islamic preoccupation with predestination.

### *The Spiritual Realm is Vast*

Islam also teaches that our universe is home to angels, devils and spirit-beings known as *jinn*s. Islam shares with Christian tradition a belief in Satan or the supreme devil, an angel who chose to rebel against Allah. Muslims also believe in angels, disembodied spirits who obey God. The English term *genie* derives from Muslim stories about the jinn, supernatural entities who can do both good and evil.

There will be a Day of Judgment. Islam has very definite views about the Day of Judgment. At a time known only to Allah, the world will end. All humans will be judged by their deeds. Humans await either eternal punishment in the fires of hell or eternal bliss in heaven. Islam has no Catholic notion of purgatory, and virtually no openness to any idea that all humans will eventually reach paradise.

The Quran describes Hell explicitly:

Those who reject our Signs, We shall soon cast into the Fire: as often as their skins are roasted through, We shall change them for

fresh skins, that they may taste the penalty: for God is Exalted in Power, Wise (4:56).

### *Heaven is the Home of the Righteous*

Muslims believe that heaven is the eternal home of the righteous. It is described in the Quran as a wonderful garden paradise, an image especially appealing to Muslims used to the sands of the Arabian deserts. There will be no sin, no death, and no tears in heaven. There will be special reward for Muslim martyrs. A few famous verses in the Quran promise that faithful Muslim men will be rewarded by beautiful women when they enter paradise. For both men and women the Quran states that “the greatest bliss is the good pleasure of Allah” (9:72).

### *Jesus is a Muslim Prophet*

Muslims claim that Jesus is a prophet of Islam. Given the bitter hostilities between Islamic and Christian empires in history, it is often assumed that Muslims have no interest in Jesus. While Muhammad is the chief prophet, Muslims also look to Jesus as a spiritual guide. Often when Muslims speak of Jesus, they will add the phrase “Peace Be Upon Him,” just as they do when Muhammad’s name is mentioned either vocally or in print. For short, in writing you will often see “Muhammad (PBUH)” or “Jesus (PBUH).” Muslims also believe that Jesus will return at the end of time to defeat the forces of the Anti-Christ.

There are significant differences between Muslim and Christian understandings of Jesus. This is most easily seen by a list of Muslim negative assertions about Christian views. For Islam, Jesus is not the Son of God and not an incarnation of God nor is Jesus divine. He did not die on the Cross at Calvary as a sacrifice for sin. He was not put in a tomb outside Jerusalem. The Christian story of Easter

is not true, though Muslims do believe that Jesus went to heaven when He died years after attempts to have Him crucified failed.

Muslims do agree with Christianity on the following points: Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, was a prophet of God, lived a holy life, taught with wisdom and love, and performed many miracles. Muslims also unite with Christian tradition in teaching that Jesus was persecuted for His faith, was opposed to idol worship (as most Jews would be), and is now in heaven.