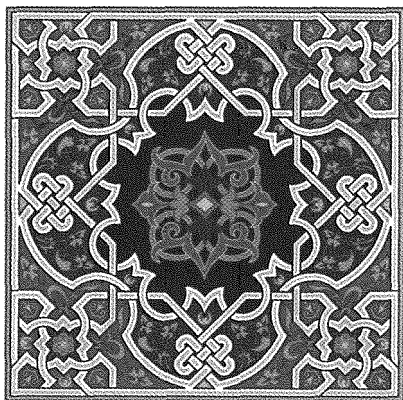


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NELSON'S *Quick Guide* TO RELIGIONS

UNDERSTANDING
ISLAM



JAMES A. BEVERLEY



THOMAS NELSON PUBLISHERS
Nashville

To
my brother
Bob Beverley

With much love and admiration

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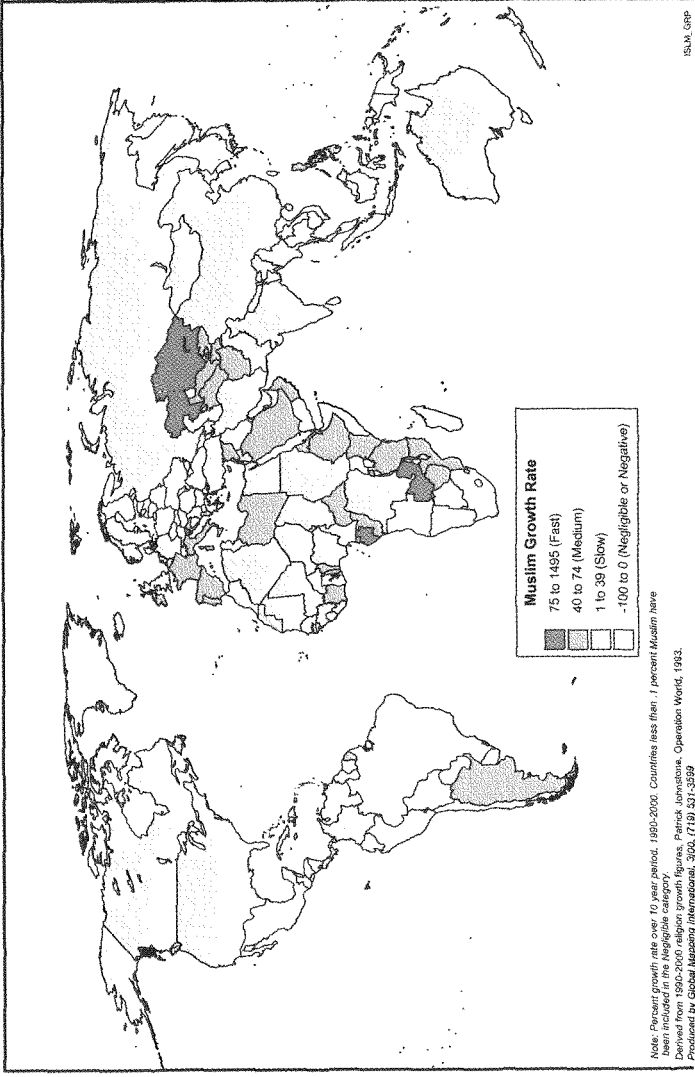
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Islam is Spreading Rapidly - Growing in Many Nations



Note: Percent growth rate over 10 year period, 1990-2000. Countries less than .1 percent Muslim here
 have not been included in the negligible category. Sources: Patrick Jones, Operation World, 1993.
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Preface

Most people don't spend a lot of time thinking about religions other than their own. The fact that Islam is the second largest religious movement in the world has been true for many years. Events in the fall of 2001, however, suddenly brought Islam to the attention of people around the world as never before. Who are these people, and what do they really believe? How are they connected to international terrorism?

Muslims in the United States and all over the globe have been placed on the defensive, called upon to explain the basis of their faith. The lack of information about their faith has raised suspicions. Many Muslims have been subjected to verbal and even physical assaults.

Today more than ever before in history there is a need and a demand for information about Islam—about its essential nature, its prophet, and its holy book (the Quran). People want to know what Islam really teaches about the role of women, about *jihad* and terrorism, and about the Palestinian question and their view of Israel. Getting the facts is essential in order for us to keep daily events in perspective.

My aim in this book is to provide accurate, objective, and fair information about all of these issues. *Understanding Islam* is meant to give readers the basic and most important facts and perspectives. Every chapter has been written with attention to the crucial literature and the leading experts on every topic. My aim has been to serve as a reliable and trustworthy guide to momentous and complex topics.

Though I am not a Muslim, I have made every effort to be fair to the Islamic faith, as well as attentive to the critical issues that are being raised about Islam. What I have written is based on years of research as a scholar of world religions. My understanding of Islam is rooted in face-to-face encounters with Muslims in the U.S.A., Canada, India, Kenya, South Africa, and England. My knowledge and perspective is also rooted in learning from friends and colleagues who have spent years living in Muslim countries and under Islamic rule.

In a world in which each day raises new questions, this book seeks to provide some foundational answers. It is hoped that out of an enhanced understanding will come a greater ability to view events from a broader perspective. Since my presentation involves some controversial issues, I ask that my readers examine my book with patience and care. I will give serious attention to thoughtful criticisms.

I am grateful to my wife Gloria, our children, Derek and Andrea, and to our son-in-law Julien for their encouragement. Thanks to Annie McKeown and Rachel Collins for research assistance, and to Kevin Rische and Aaron Matthews for computer help. For comments on argument and perspective, I am grateful to Bob Beverley, Jay Smith, John Wilkinson, Larry Matthews, Donald Wiebe, Bob Morris, J. Gordon Melton, and Mitchell Bard. Thanks also to Wayne Kinde, Lee Hollaway, Teri Wilhelms, Barbara West, and Phil Stoner at Thomas Nelson.

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CHAPTER ONE

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 sixth century A.D. 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. Even if you knew everything there was to know about Islam, these keys to understanding the Muslim faith would be the same.

1. What is absolutely primary in Islam is **a total belief in Allah** (the Arabic term for God). 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 primary Muslim scripture. "In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Praise be to Allah,

the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds.” It continues: “Master of the Day of Judgment. You do we worship, and Your aid we seek. Show us the straight way.”

2. Muslims also believe that Allah has spoken to the world through **Muhammad, the final and greatest Prophet**. The vast majority of Muslims believe that Muhammad (who died in A.D. 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.

3. 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, and memorized, studied, but never questioned.

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 because the Quran says so. Muslim veiling of women is derived from one passage that demands modesty. The hand of a thief is amputated simply because the Quran says this is to be the punishment. Muslims have certain views about Jesus because the Muslim holy book teaches so.

4. Islam is also a **religion of law**. While every religion has general principles, some religions like Orthodox Judaism and Roman Catholicism have elaborate rules and regulations. This is even more so in Islam, since Islamic law extends to every area of life, including how Muslim nations are to obey God's will, known as *Shariah* [SHAR rih ah].

The history of Islamic jurisprudence is very long and complicated, especially after Islam experienced a serious division following the death of Muhammad. Basically, however, 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: (a) what direction should be faced when using the bathroom, (b) when swallowing thick dust makes fasting void, and (c) how much is owed Allah in alms-giving if a Muslim owns 61 camels.

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 who have ever lived.

- ◇ **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 messenger." Devout Muslims repeat this statement several times each day.
- ◇ **Prayer.** The second pillar involves the discipline of prayer (*salat*) and the call to 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* (temples), 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% of the Muslim's assets but 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 sun-up to sundown during the entire month of Ramadan (the ninth month in the Islamic calendar). Unless prohibited by bad health, all 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 *hajj*, is the command for all able-bodied Muslims to make a

pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. Every year two million Muslim pilgrims make their way to Mecca. Outside the city both males and females 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 Kaba, 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 above, 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 over-riding and paramount aspects of Islam, seven other fundamental beliefs help paint an accurate picture.

1. 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. Thus, Jews in the time of Moses were Muslims, and Christians in the time of Jesus were Muslims! 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 40.

2. 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.

3. **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" or "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 pitiful little "house" you can imagine, the "home owner" had a sign, bigger than his house, proclaiming his faith in the great Allah.

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 Muslim culture believe that a sense of fatalism has emerged as a result of this Islamic preoccupation with predestination.

4. **Islam also teaches that our universe is home to angels, devils, and another kind of 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.

5. **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 hell fire 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 explicitness of Islam on the severity of hell fire makes frightening reading. One famous verse in the fourth *surah* (chapter) of the Quran states: "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." (v. 56)

6. **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. Some traditions imply that no Jews or Christians will be in heaven, only Muslims. 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)

7. **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)".

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. Jesus is not divine. He did not die on the Cross at Calvary. His death is not 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.