**ISLAM**

**A Brief Introduction**

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**Emergence of Islam**

Islam is a continuation of the monotheistic faith associated with the tradition of Prophet Abraham who is considered to be the patriarch of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It emerged with the Prophet Muhammad (570-632), peace be upon him (pbuh), receiving divine revelations from God in the seventh century beginning around 610 AC (After Christ) in Makkah (also spelled Mecca) in the Arabian Peninsula.

**Pre Islamic Arabia**

The prevailing spirit of the pre-Islamic Arab society, to which the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) referred as *jahiliyya,* is usually interpreted as a “Time of Ignorance”. According to recent research by Karen Armstrong and other scholars, however, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) “used the term *jahiliyya* to refer not to an historical era, but to a state of mind that caused violence and terror in the seventh century Arabia”. It was a tribal culture in which nomadic Beduin tribes survived by raiding each other’s caravans, male children were valued as a matter of economic necessity while female babies were viewed as a burden and thus buried alive, and the clans and tribes were caught up in continuing warfare and vendettas.

Islam’s principal tenet is the Oneness of God (*tawhid*) and the resulting primacy of justice so that everyone can live in peace and dignity and in harmony with one another. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) taught that men and women were equal, ended female infanticide, encouraged freeing of slaves, and ultimately succeeded in convincing the warring tribes that instead of merely surviving by raiding each other’s caravans and fighting, they could thrive by trading with each other and live in peace. The simplicity of the message of tawhid and its success in ending tribal terrorism helped spread Islam throughout the Arabian Peninsula during the Prophet’s lifetime.

**Migration (Hijra)**

The Prophet Muhammad preached the message of the Oneness of God in Makkah for 13 years during which he and his few followers were persecuted and eventually forced to migrate to an oasis about 350 miles north of Makkah, called Yathrib. The year of migration or Hijra, 622 AC, marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar.

Yathrib was home to several Jewish tribes and as well as many pagan communities. Soon it was renamed Madinat al Nabi, the City of the Prophet, where he established a compact among Muslim, Jews, and the pagans to protect the city against outside attacks. This is also known as the Constitution of Madinah, the first written constitution in the history of mankind.

**Islam as a Way of Life**

The word Islam is derived from an Arabic root word that means submission and peace. Thus Muslims achieve peace by submitting to the Will of God. Muslims do not view Islam as a new religion. They believe that it is the same faith taught by all the prophets of God, including, Abraham, David, Moses, and Jesus. They also believe that Islam formalizes and clarifies the true faith in the one God and purifies it by removing ideas that were added in error. It is called a Deen, which is more than a religion, because it is a way of life based on universal values.

**Sacred Texts**

The two primary sources of guidance for Muslims are: 1) the Qur'an, containing the direct words of Allah 'the One True God' as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh); and 2) the Hadith, which is a collection of the authenticated sayings and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) that describe the Sunnah or the way of the Prophet.

**Essence of Islam**

Islam as a faith, observed by about 1.8 billion people worldwide, can be best understood in terms of four elements: (A) Beliefs specified in the Qur’an, (B) Practices in the form of the five pillars established by the Prophet Muhammad, (C) Spiritual Perfection in terms of Taqwa or God consciousness,, and (D) Ethical principles (described below) that guide a Muslim as an individual and as a member of society.

1. **Beliefs (Arkan al Iman or Aqida)**

The basic beliefs of Muslims (or elements of faith called Arkan al Iman) are:

1. Belief in One God Almighty as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe
2. Belief in Angels (e.g., Gabriel, Michael)
3. Belief in all the Prophets of God (e.g., Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad)
4. Belief that the Books of God are divine revelations (e.g., the Torah, the Gospel, the Qur’an)
5. Belief in the Day of Judgment (for accountability to God)
6. Belief in the Absolute Power of God (Qadr, which should not be confused with pre-destination)
7. **Practices (The Five Pillars of Islam)**

The practical duties of all Muslims, known as the Five Pillars of Islam (called Arkan al Islam), consist of:

1. Shahadah, Declaration of Faith: There is no god but God and Muhammad is His Messenger.
2. Salah (prayer), five times a day while facing the Ka’bah; Jummu’a congregational prayer is on Friday.
3. Zakat, i.e., regular mandatory donation to charity equal to 2.5% of one’s accumulated wealth over and above one’s needs, with additional optional donations to the needy known as sadaqa, in any amount.
4. Fasting for 30 days from dawn to sunset during the month of Ramadan during which the Prophet Muhammad began to receive the Qur'an from Allah. No food or drink or conjugal relations while fasting.
5. Hajj or pilgrimage to Makkah in Saudi Arabia at least once in one’s life, if one can afford it financially and can perform the Hajj rituals physically. With all men required to dress in two unstiched pieces of white cloth while performing the ritual circumambulation of the ka’bah, the Hajj represents the most powerful symbol of equality in Islam, an experience that transformed Malcolm X and moved the entire African American Muslim community into mainstream followers of Islam.
6. **Perfection in Faith (Ihsan)**

A Muslim can achieve perfection in faith by being steadfast in the six beliefs, observing the five pillars regularly, and worshipping God with such devotion that, according to the Prophet Muhammad, “even if you cannot see God, you must believe that He sees you.”

1. **Ethical Principles of Human Responsibilities and Rights in Islam**

Based on the above beliefs and practices of the faith established by the Qur’an and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), scholars have derived a set of eight ethical principles that should guide the practical life of a Muslim and of Muslim society. (See brief description of Shari’ah below.) These are universal ethical principles of human responsibilities and rights, which are consistent with the principles underlying the Constitution of the United States:

**Monotheistic Faith**

Muslims follow a strict monotheism recognizing only one God, the Almighty Creator, who is just, omnipotent, forgiving, compassionate, and merciful. The Arabic name for the one true God is Allah, which is the name even Arabic speaking Christians use for God. The first part of the Islamic declaration of faith states that “there is no god, but God,” which means that there is no other entity worthy of worship. Worshipping anything or any being other than the One God is tantamount to *shirk* or associating partners with God, which is the greatest sin.

**Forgiveness of Sins**

People are warned in the Qur’an that Satan encourages people to sin, which they must do their best to avoid. Each human being is accountable for his or her own actions before God on the Day of Judgment. Salvation can be achieved by true faith, fulfilling the required responsibilities, and good deeds. A good deed can wipe out a bad one. Muslims who sincerely repent and submit to God will receive forgiveness of sins and go to Paradise after death. God, out of his infinite compassion and mercy, may forgive any sins, such as neglecting prayer or other religious duties, but one must ask for forgiveness from other human beings one may have wronged.

**No Original Sin**

In Islam, there is no concept of original sin. Islam does not blame Eve for causing Adam to commit the first sin. Both erred. Every human being is born innocent, but acquires sinful ways from life experiences and upbringing. God has shown the right path and the wrong ones and has given human beings the intellect to understand the difference and the freedom to choose. No one else can atone for one’s sins.

**Absolute Equality**

Islam teaches that all human beings are equal and that racism is a crime. The Prophet Mohammad declared in his last sermon that there is no superiority of a white over a black or a black over a white, nor is there superiority of an Arab over a non-Arab or of a non-Arab over an Arab. He also reminded men about their responsibilities toward women and to treat them with respect and be their protectors.

**Respect for All Prophets**

Muslims respect all the earlier prophets, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, among the 25 to 30 major prophets mentioned in the Qur’an. While the Prophet Muhammad is considered to be the last and final prophet and messenger, the Qur’an declares that “*Say ye: "We believe in Allah, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Isma'il, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to (all) prophets from their Lord: We make no difference between one and another of them: And we bow to Allah (in Islam)*." (Surah al Baqarah 2:136).  Hence no distinction among the prophets on the importance of their story and message. Thus Muslims recognize and revere many prophets from the Judeo-Christian traditions.

**Reverence for Jesus and Mary**

Muslims believe in the virgin birth of Jesus and regard him as a highly respected prophet of God, not as a Son of God. They do not believe that Jesus was killed on the cross, though some have always said that he suffered on the cross. Instead he was lifted up to the heavens and will return as the Messiah. Muslims revere Mary, the Mother of Jesus, as a very pious role model for Muslim women. Chapter 19 of the Quran, Surah Maryam, is named after the blessed Virgin Mary.

**Sanctity of Life**

Islam teaches that life is made sacred by God. Almighty God says in the Qur’an that killing of one innocent human being is like killing all of humankind and saving one life is like saving all of humanity. Thus suicide is forbidden, as is killing of innocent human beings. On that basis, terrorism cannot be justified and is condemned. Abortion is not allowed, except to save the life of the mother.

**Jihad**

The Arabic term “jihad” means struggle or effort and is of three kinds: 1) The *jihad al akbar* or “greatest jihad”, which is the effort or struggle to understand the true word of God and to control one’s human impulses in order to achieve real peace by submitting to the Will of God; 2) The *jihad al saghir* or *asghar*, the lesser jihad, which is the community-approved joint defensive struggle using armed force against direct attacks, to end oppression, and to defend the eight universal principles of human rights against violation by aggressors; and 3) The *jihad al kabir* or “great jihad”, also known by the derivative term, *Ijtihad*, which may be called an intellectual jihad. It calls for Muslims to continue to strive to address new issues and challenges, such as stem cell research and a capital-intensive economy. This is the only form of jihad explicitly mentioned in the Qur’an, while the other two are addressed implicitly throughout the Qur’an using different terminology in different contexts.

The Prophet Muhammad said that the best way to demonstrate *jihad al akbar* is to speak truth to a tyrant.

**Shari’ah**

The *Shari’ah* is the high level framework of universal principles in Islamic jurisprudence derived through intellectual effort by scholars to understand the meaning and coherence (*nazm*) of the Qur’an and of the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad as recorded in the Hadith. The following eight principles of human responsibilities and rights provide a guide for Muslims.

1) Respect for Divine Revelation and Freedom of Religion; 2) Respect for the Human Person and Life; 3) Respect for Family and Community; 4) Respect for the Environment; 5) Respect for Economic Justice with Broadened Capital Ownership; 6) Respect for Political Justice with Self-Determination (democracy); 7) Respect for Human Dignity with Gender Equity; and 8) Respect for Knowledge and Dissemination of Thought.

Islam embraces political freedom and democracy based on limiting the political and economic power of the state; free and open markets for determining just prices, just wages, and just profits; the institution of private property for linking owners to control of production and profits; the removal of all artificial legal and monetary barriers to equality of access to future ownership rights and powers; and the creation of money without the burden of interest and based only on real assets rather than on speculation,.

**Schools of Thought (Fiqh)**

The higher framework provides the *‘Usul al Fiqh* or the Principles (Roots) of the Fiqh, the system of specific laws, rules, and regulations, which must reflect and conform to the highest principles of the Shari’ah. Over time, several Muslim scholars developed a system of practical interpretations of the Shari’ah dealing with day to day matters. There are four Sunni schools of Fiqh (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafii, and Hanbali) and two main Shi’a schools (Jaffari and Zaidi).

**Dietary Rules**

Alcohol and pork products are forbidden, as are drugs. Additional rules about halal (permitted), mandub (preferred ), makruh (disliked), and haram (forbidden) regarding certain foods have been developed by the different schools of thought.

**Role of an Imam and Islamic Institutions**

An Imam is the spiritual leader of a congregation and is chosen by the local community that runs a mosque or Islamic center. He leads all prayers in the mosque, is usually involved in Islamic education of the young, and touches every aspect of a Muslim congregant’s life from birth to burial. There is no religious hierarchy in Islam in general, with the exception that the Shi’a community recognizes a ranking of ayatollahs based on their scholarship. The Sunni community looks to scholars at Al Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, for fatwas or religious rulings regarding interpretations of the Qur’an and Sunnah.

**Diverse Muslim Umma**

According to a 2009 PEW estimate, there are about 1.8 billion Muslims in the world or about 23% of the global population. Some 87% to 90% are Sunni (followers of the Sunnah or the way of the Prophet) and the remaining 10% to 13% are Shi’a (Shia -e- Ali or ‘partisans of Ali’). This division is not religious, but grew out of a political dispute about who should have succeeded the Prophet Muhammad, either politically or spiritually or both, when he passed away in 632 A.C. The world wide Muslim Umma represents many cultures and languages as seen in the most diverse gathering on earth every year when some 3 million Muslims perform Hajj in Makkah, Saudi Arabia.

**Islamic Holidays**

Muslims follow a lunar calendar with the beginning of each month based on sighting of the moon. The Islamic or Hijra year is shorter than the Gregorian, which is why Islamic holidays come about 11 days earlier each year. The key holidays are:

1. Eid-al-Fitr, a prayer and feast following the end of fasting during the month of Ramadan, the 9th month of the Islamic calendar; a non-commercial celebration; families socialize and children get nominal presents.
2. Eid-al-Adha, the feast of the sacrifice at the end of the Hajj, which commemorates the sacrifice that Prophet Abraham was willing to make of his first born son, Ishmael;
3. Ashura, the 10th day of Muharram (the first month of the Islamic year), to commemorate the martyrdom of Prophet Muhammad’s grandson, Hussain; and
4. Mawlid (Milad al Nabi) or the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (but not celebrated by all schools of thought in Islam; some Muslim countries observe a public holiday on this day).