

What is Islam?

(part 1 of 4): The Core of Islam



Among the blessings and favors that God has bestowed upon humanity is that He endowed them with an innate ability to recognize and acknowledge His existence. He placed this awareness deep in their hearts as a natural disposition that has not changed since human beings were first created. Furthermore, He reinforced this natural disposition with the signs that he placed in creation that testify to His existence. However, since it is not possible for human beings to have a detailed knowledge of God except through revelation from Himself, God sent His Messengers to teach the people about their Creator Who they must worship. These Messengers also brought with them the details of how to worship God, because such details cannot be known except by way of revelation. These two fundamentals were the most important things that the Messengers of all the divine revelations brought with them from God. On this basis, all the divine revelations have had the same lofty objectives, which are:

1. To affirm the Oneness of God - the praised and glorified Creator – in His essence and His attributes.
2. To affirm that God alone should be worshipped and that no other being should be worshipped along with Him or instead of Him.
3. To safeguard human welfare and oppose corruption and evil. Thus, everything that safeguards faith, life, reason, wealth and lineage are part of this human welfare that religion protects. On the other hand, anything that endangers these five universal needs is a form of corruption that religion opposes and prohibits.

4. To invite the people to the highest level of virtue, moral values, and noble customs.

The ultimate goal of every Divine Message has always been the same: to guide the people to God, to make them aware of Him, and to have them worship Him alone. Each Divine Message came to strengthen this meaning, and the following words were repeated on the tongues of all the Messengers: “Worship God, you have no god other than Him.” This message was conveyed to humanity by prophets and messengers which God sent to every nation. All of these messengers came with this same message, the message of Islam.

All the Divine Messages came to bring the life of the people into willing submission to God. For this reason, they all share the name of “Islam”, or “submission” derived from the same word as “Salam”, or “peace”, in Arabic. Islam, in this sense, was the religion of all the prophets, but why does one see different variations of the religion of God if they all emanated from the same source? The answer is twofold.

The first reason is that as a result of the passage of time, and due to the fact that previous religions were not under the Divine protection of God, they underwent much change and variation. As a result, we see that the fundamental truths which were brought by all messengers now differ from one religion to another, the most apparent being the strict tenet of the belief and worship of God and God alone.

The second reason for this variation is that God, in His infinite Wisdom and eternal Will, decreed that all the divine missions prior to the final message of Islam brought by Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, be limited to a specific time frame. As a result, their laws and methodologies dealt with the specific conditions of the people whom they had been sent to address.

Humanity has passed through numerous periods of guidance, misguidance, integrity, and deviation, from the most primitive age to the heights of civilization. Divine guidance accompanied humanity through all of this, always providing the appropriate solutions and remedies.

This was the essence of the disparity that existed between the different religions. This disagreement never went beyond the particulars of the Divine Law. Each manifestation of the Law addressed the particular problems of the people it was meant for. However, the areas of agreement were significant and many, such as fundamentals of faith; the basic principles and objectives of the Divine Law, such as protecting faith, life, reason, wealth, and lineage and establishing justice in the land; and certain fundamental prohibitions, some of the most important of these being idolatry, fornication, murder, theft, and giving false witness. Moreover, they also agreed upon moral virtues like honesty, justice, charity, kindness, chastity, righteousness, and mercy. These principles as well as

others are permanent and lasting; they are the essence of all the Divine Messages and bind them all together.

(part 2 of 4): The Origins of Islam

But where does the message of Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, fit in with the previous messages revealed by God? A brief history of the prophets might clear this point.

The first human, Adam, followed Islam, in that he directed worship to God alone and none else and abided by His commandments. But through the passage of time and the dispersal of humanity throughout the earth, people strayed from this message and began directing worship to others instead of or along with God. Some took to worshipping the pious who passed away amongst them, while others took to worshipping spirits and forces of nature. It was then that God started to send messengers to humanity steering them back to the worship of God Alone, which accorded to their true nature, and warning them of the grave consequences of directing any type of worship to others besides Him.

The first of these messengers was Noah, who was sent to preach this message of Islam to his people, after they had started to direct worship to their pious forefathers along with God. Noah called his people to leave the worship of their idols, and ordered them to return to the worship of God Alone. Some of them followed the teachings of Noah, while the majority disbelieved in him. Those who followed Noah were followers of Islam, or Muslims, while those that did not, remained in their disbelief and were seized with a punishment for doing so.

After Noah, God sent messengers to every nation who had strayed from the Truth, to steer them back to it. This Truth was the same throughout time: to reject all objects of worship and to direct all worship without exception to God and none else, the Creator and Lord of all, and to abide by His commandments. But as we mentioned before, because each nation differed in regards to their way of life, language, and culture, specific messengers were sent to specific nations for a specific time period.

God sent messengers to all nations, and to the Kingdom of Babylon He sent Abraham – one of the earliest and greatest prophets – who called his people to reject the worship of the idols to which they were devoted. He called them to Islam, but they rejected him and even tried to kill him. God put Abraham through many tests, and he proved true to all of them. For his many sacrifices, God proclaimed that he would raise from amongst his progeny a great nation and choose prophets from amongst them. Whenever people from his progeny started to stray away from the Truth, which was to worship none but God alone and to

obey His commandments, God sent them another messenger steering them back to it.

Consequently, we see that many prophets were sent amongst the progeny of Abraham, such as his two sons Isaac and Ishmael, along with Jacob (Israel), Joseph, David, Solomon, Moses, and of course, Jesus, to mention a few, may the peace and blessings of God be upon them all. Each prophet was sent to the Children of Israel (the Jews) when they went astray from the true religion of God, and it became obligatory upon them to follow the messenger which was sent to them and obey their commandments. All of the messengers came with the same message, to reject worship of all other beings except God Alone and to obey His commandments. Some disbelieved in the prophets, while others believed. Those that believed were followers of Islam, or Muslims.

From amongst the messengers was Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, from the progeny of Ishmael, the son of Abraham, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, who was sent as a messenger in succession to Jesus. Muhammad preached the same message of Islam as the previous prophets and messengers – to direct all worship to God Alone and none else and to obey His commandments – in which the followers of the previous prophets went astray.

So as we see, the Prophet Muhammad was not the founder of a new religion, as many people mistakenly think, but he was sent as the Final Prophet of Islam. By revealing His final message to Muhammad, which is an eternal and universal message for all of mankind, God finally fulfilled the covenant that He made with Abraham.

Just as it was incumbent upon the those who were alive to follow the message of the last of the succession of prophets which was sent to them, it becomes incumbent upon all of humanity to follow the message of Muhammad. God promised that this message would remain unchanged and fit for all times and places. Suffice is it to say that the way of Islam is the same as the way of the prophet Abraham, because both the Bible and the Quran portray Abraham as a towering example of someone who submitted himself completely to God and directed worship to Him alone and none else, and without any intermediaries. Once this is realized, it should be clear that Islam has the most continuous and universal message of any religion, because all prophets and messengers were “Muslims”, i.e. those who submitted to God’s will, and they preached “Islam”, i.e. submission to the will of Almighty God by worshipping Him Alone and obeying His commandments.

So we see that those who call themselves Muslims today do not follow a new religion; rather they follow the religion and message of all prophets and messengers which were sent to humanity by God’s command, also known as

Islam. The word “Islam” is an Arabic word which literally means “submission to God”, and Muslims are those who willfully submit to and actively obey God, living in accordance with His message.

(part 3 of 4): The Essential Beliefs of Islam

There are many aspects of belief in which one who adheres to Islam must have firm conviction. From those aspects, the most important are six, known as the “Six Articles of Belief”.



1) Belief in God

Islam upholds strict monotheism and belief in God forms the heart of their faith. Islam teaches belief in one God who neither gives birth nor was born Himself, and has no share in His caretaking of the world. He alone gives life, causes death, brings good, causes affliction, and provides sustenance for

His creation. God in Islam is the sole Creator, Lord, Sustainer, Ruler, Judge, and Savior of the universe. He has no equal in His qualities and abilities, such as knowledge and power. All worship, veneration and homage is to be directed to God and none else. Any breach of these concepts negates the basis of Islam.

2) Belief in the Angels

Adherents to Islam must believe in the Unseen world as mentioned in the Quran. From this world are the angels’ emissaries of God, each assigned with a specific task. They have no free-will or ability to disobey; it is their very nature to be God’s faithful servants. Angels are not to be taken as demigods or objects of praise or veneration; they are mere servants of God obeying His every command.

3) Belief in the Prophets and Messengers

Islam is a universal and inclusive religion. Muslims believe in the prophets, not just the Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, but the Hebrew prophets, including Abraham and Moses, as well as the prophets of the New Testament, Jesus, and John the Baptist. Islam teaches God did not send prophets to Jews and Christians alone, rather He sent prophets to all nations in the world with one central message: worship God alone. Muslims must believe in all prophets sent by God mentioned in the Quran, without making any

distinction between them. Muhammad was sent with the final message, and there is no prophet to come after him. His message is final and eternal, and through him God completed His Message to humanity.

4) Belief in the Sacred Texts

Muslims believe in all books that God has sent down to humanity through His prophets. These books include the Books of Abraham, the Torah of Moses, the Psalms of David, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. These books all had the same source (God), the same message, and all were revealed in truth. This does not mean that they have been preserved in truth. Muslims (and many other Jewish and Christian scholars and historians) find that the books in existence today are not the original scriptures, which in fact have been lost, changed, and/or translated over and over again, losing the original message.

As Christians view the New Testament to fulfill and complete the Old Testament, Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad received revelations from God through the angel Gabriel to correct human error that had entered into the scriptures and doctrine of Judaism, Christianity and all other religions. This revelation is the Quran, revealed in the Arabic language, and found today in its pristine form. It seeks to guide mankind in all walks of life; spiritual, temporal, individual and collective. It contains directions for the conduct of life, relates stories and parables, describes the attributes of God, and speaks of the best rules to govern social life. It has directions for everybody, every place, and for all time. Millions of people today have memorized the Quran, and all copies of the Quran found today and in the past are identical. God has promised that He will guard the Quran from change until the end of times, so that Guidance be clear to humanity and the message of all the prophets be available for those who seek it.

5) Belief in Life after Death

Muslims believe that a day will come when all of creation will perish and resurrected in order to be judged for their deeds: The Day of Judgment. On this day, all will gather in the presence of God and each individual will be questioned about their life in the world and how they lived it. Those who held correct beliefs about God and life, and followed their belief with righteous deeds will enter Paradise, even though they may pay for some of their sins in Hell if God out of His Infinite Justice chooses not to forgive them. As for those who fell into polytheism in its many faces, they will enter Hellfire, never to leave therefrom.

6) Belief in the Divine Decree

Islam asserts that God has full power and knowledge of all things, and that nothing happens except by His Will and with His full knowledge. What is known

as divine decree, fate, or "destiny" is known in Arabic as al-Qadr. The destiny of every creature is already known to God.

This belief however does not contradict with the idea of man's free will to choose his course of action. God does not force us to do anything; we can choose whether to obey or disobey Him. Our choice is known to God before we even do it. We do not know what our destiny is; but God knows the fate of all things.

Therefore, we should have firm faith that whatever befalls us, it is according to God's will and with His full knowledge. There may be things that happen in this world that we do not understand, but we should trust that God has wisdom in all things.

(part 4 of 4): Islamic Worship

There are five simple but essential observances that all practicing Muslims accept and follow. These "Pillars of Islam" represent the core that unites all Muslims.

1) The 'Declaration of Faith'

A Muslim is one who testifies that "none deserves worship but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah." This declaration is known as the "*shahada*" (witness, testimony). Allah is the Arabic name for God, just as Yahweh is the Hebrew name for God. By making this simple proclamation one becomes a Muslim. The proclamation affirms Islam's absolute belief in the oneness of God, His exclusive right to be worshipped, as well as the doctrine that associating anything else with God is the one unforgivable sin as we read in the Koran:

"God does not forgive anyone for associating something with Him, while He does forgive whomever He wishes to for anything else. Anyone who gives God partners has invented an awful sin." (Quran 4:48)

The second part of the testimony of faith states that Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, is a prophet of God like Abraham, Moses and Jesus before him. Muhammad brought the last and final revelation. In accepting Muhammad as the "seal of the prophets," Muslims believe that his prophecy confirms and fulfills all of the revealed messages, beginning with Adam's. In addition, Muhammad serves as the role model through his exemplary life. A believer's effort to follow Muhammad's example reflects the emphasis of Islam on practice and action.

2) The Prayer (*Salah*)

Muslims worship five times a day: at daybreak, noon, mid afternoon, sunset, and evening. It helps keep believers mindful of God in the stress of work and family. It resets the spiritual focus, reaffirms total dependence on God, and puts worldly concerns within the perspective of the last judgment and the afterlife. The prayers consist of standing, bowing, kneeling, putting the forehead on the ground, and sitting. The Prayer is a means in which a relationship between God and His creation is maintained. It includes recitations from the Quran, praises of God, prayers for forgiveness and other various supplications. The prayer is an expression of submission, humility, and adoration of God. Prayers can be offered in any clean place, alone or together, in a mosque or at home, at work or on the road, indoors or out. It is preferable to pray with others as one body united in the worship of God, demonstrating discipline, brotherhood, equality, and solidarity. As they pray, Muslims face Mecca, the holy city centered around the Kaaba - the house of God built by Abraham and his son Ishmael.

3) The Compulsory Charity (*Zakah*)

In Islam, the true owner of everything is God, not man. People are given wealth as a trust from God. *Zakah* is worship and thanksgiving to God by supporting the poor, and through it one's wealth is purified. It requires an annual contribution of 2.5 percent of an individual's wealth and assets. Therefore, *Zakah* is not mere "charity", it is an obligation on those who have received their wealth from God to meet the needs of less fortunate members of the community. *Zakah* is used to support the poor and the needy, help those in debt, and, in olden times, to free slaves.

4) The Fast of Ramadan (*Sawm*)

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar which is spent in fasting. Healthy Muslims abstain from dawn to sunset from food, drink, and sexual activity. Fasting develops spirituality, dependence upon God, and brings identification with the less fortunate. A special evening prayer is also held in mosques in which recitations of the Quran are heard. Families rise before dawn to take their first meal of the day to sustain them till sunset. The month of Ramadan ends with one of the two major Islamic celebrations, the Feast of the Breaking of the Fast, called Eid al-Fitr, which is marked by joyfulness, family visits, and exchanging of gifts.

5) The fifth Pillar is the Pilgrimage or Hajj to Mecca

At least once in a lifetime, every adult Muslim who is physically and financially able is required to sacrifice time, wealth, status, and ordinary comforts

of life to make the Hajj pilgrimage, putting himself totally at God's service. Every year over two million believers from a diversity of cultures and languages travel from all over the world to the sacred city of Mecca^[1] to respond to God's call.

Who are Muslims?

The Arabic word "Muslim" literally means "someone who is in a state of Islam (submission to the will and law of God)". The message of Islam is meant for the entire world, and anyone who accepts this message becomes a Muslim. There are over a billion Muslims worldwide. Muslims represent the majority population in fifty-six countries. Many people are surprised to know that the majority of Muslims are not Arab. Even though most Arabs are Muslims, there are Arabs who are Christians, Jews and atheists. Only 20 percent of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims come from Arab countries. There are significant Muslim populations in India, China, Central Asian Republics, Russia, Europe, and America. If one just takes a look at the various peoples who live in the Muslim World - from Nigeria to Bosnia and from Morocco to Indonesia - it is easy enough to see that Muslims come from all different races, ethnic groups, cultures and nationalities. Islam has always been a universal message for all people. Islam is the second largest religion in the world and will soon be the second largest religion in America. Yet, few people know what Islam is.

Footnotes:

^[1] Mecca city is located in Saudi Arabia.