

## ISLAM - SURVEY

### Allah (God)

- Allah speaks directly in the **Qur'an** to the **entire world**
- Allah is the same deity as the monotheistic god of the Torah and the Christian god
- Allah is utterly and totally omniscient, transcendent, powerful, and singular

The **Qur'an** is the **revelation**  
**Muslims** are those who submit to **Allah**  
**Ummah** is the name for Muslim community

### Islam enunciates an insistent and urgent monotheism

### Muhammed (570-632)

- 610: begins to receive revelation of Qur'an
- 622: his flight to Medina, known as Hijrah, inaugurates Muslim calendar, and signals the dramatic rise and growth of Islam
- 630: Muhammed re-enters Mecca in triumph
- 632: he dies suddenly, without preparing for succession of his power(s)
- Muhammed is only a human being - he is not a deity or an aspect of Allah

### Qur'an

- the singular miracle in Islam
- it can only be truly known in Arabic
- represents the final revelation, since here Allah speaks directly
- therefore Mohammed is known as the "Seal of the Prophets"
- the Qur'an is organized into **sura-s** (word means 'step' or 'degree'), in descending order from longest to shortest
- each verse is called an **ayat**, meaning a 'sign'
- very few sura-s deal with only one subject; most leap from one concern to another. This results in a style where the infinitude of Allah informs every line and thought, so that the whole theology is present in each part, and yet there is never a technical systematic presentation of the underlying philosophy.
- The Qur'an is recited and memorized, and there are many books of commentary on it in the Muslim tradition.

## Hadith

Accounts of the life, actions, and words of Mohammed and his closest associates, passed down as an important tradition, showing how a noble muslim life - i.e. surrender to Allah - could be lived. The hadith are accompanied by chains of corroboration, which are judged as more or less strong by legalists.

## The Five Pillars

1. The Shahadah, or creed: There is no god but Allah, and Mohammed is His prophet.
2. Prayer: to be said five times daily, at prescribed times.
3. Almsgiving: Everyone is to give 1/40th of their entire worth to the less fortunate in the community, each and every year.
4. Fasting: During the month of Ramadan, a sunrise to sunset fast is observed by all who are able.
5. Pilgrimage: All Muslims are supposed to travel once in their lifetimes to Mecca and the Ka'Ba stone, in a pilgrimage known as the 'hajj'.

The Five Pillars illustrate each individual's relationship to both Allah and the community.

## Historical Outline

The First Four Caliphs:

1. Abu Bakr 632-634 - one of the first five converts to Islam, preserves Islam after Mohammed's death by proclaiming that Islam is about Allah, not Mohammed.
2. Umar 634-644 - during his caliphate, there were decisive victories over the Byzantine empire and the Persian empire
3. Uthman 644-656 - chosen because he was the weak, compromise candidate; became a nepotist for his Ummayyad family
4. 'Ali 656-661 - nephew of the Prophet, married to the Prophet's daughter Fatima, Ali was one of the first five converts. He had been pressed as a candidate in all previous caliphate decisions, but passed over for less controversial figures.

The succession battles around the figure of 'Ali led to sectarian divisions. The Kharijites said that 'Ali had compromised with his enemies (the Ummayyads) and thus shown that he was not the most righteous of the Muslims.

The Shi'ites claimed that 'Ali's blood relation to the Prophet made him the lawful caliph all along, and that he had been deliberately passed over because of the difficulty that righteousness has living in this world. When 'Ali's son Husayn was later killed in an ambush, this theology gained another significant martyr.

The Umayyad dynasty (661-750) was established by Mu'awiyya (r. 661-680), who defeated 'Ali both in diplomacy and in battle. The Umayyads were more worldly in their outlook than the first four caliphs, taking advantage of the luxuries offered by the sweep of Muslim conquests. Mu'awiyya, a gifted military and political leader (but a despised figure in the eyes of the Shi'ite Muslims), relocated the center of the Muslim world to the Mediterranean by establishing his capitol in Damascus. He also called himself a king (malik), and began a dynastic succession by appointing his son Yazid as crown prince.

These developments led to strong reactions on the part of ascetics - who later became known as the **Sufi-s** or mystics - and to the theological development of the **Sunni** sect, which sought to follow the ways of Mohammed (as expressed in the **hadith** and in the **sunnah** 'path' of the Prophet) and treasure the unity of the ummah (community) before partisan politics. The name Sunni is derived from the word **sunna**, which means 'tradition'.

The 'Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258) again shifted the center of the Muslim world, this time to Baghdad in Persia (modern day Iran and Iraq). It is at this time that **Sunni Islam** is firmly established as Muslim orthodoxy. It is also a time of great philosophical developments in Islam, as the Muslim world is the direct heir to Greek philosophy. The life and work of al-Ghazali (1058-1111) unites philosophic speculation, Qur'anic theology and Sufi mystic experience. The legal schools of Islam, in which the Qur'an is used as a guide to human ethical relations and social structures, are established during this period. Geopolitically, Islam's influence extends from Spain through North Africa, throughout the Middle East, and extends (irregularly) into India.

The Mamluks (1250-1517) were a tightly bonded army made up of slaves and former slaves. When the 'Abbasids were overthrown in Baghdad, the Mamluks - who had long been a crucial component of the fighting force in Muslim armies - took power in the areas from Egypt to modern day south-eastern Turkey, and established a remnant of the 'Abbasids in Egypt. They ruled as a military oligarchy, and had greater impact on architecture and literature than on religious matters.

The Moghul empire in India (ca. 1500-1750) marked an era of power, prestige, and religious syncretism for Islam and for India. The mutual influence of Sufism and Hindu mystical traditions known as 'bhakti' produced new heights in Indian literature, and also spawned the new religious movement of Sikhism. The great emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605) created his own state religion which combined aspects of Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Jainism. Traditional Muslim theology also flourished creatively. The presence of a Muslim empire in India facilitated the expansion of Islam in South-East Asia, most notably in Indonesia. The empire was weakened by internal dynastic succession disputes, and finally fractured into small independent states. European

imperialism, especially British, also played a significant part in ending the days of Muslim rule in India.

The Ottoman Empire (ca. 1450-1919) held sway over much of the Middle East, centered in modern-day Turkey. They synthesized the realms of government and religion within Sunni orthodoxy.

The Wahhabi movement (late 18th century) stressed a return to religious purity and dedication to the literal reading of the Qur'an. The movement started in the Arabian peninsula, and expanded into a combined social/religious/political force. The Wahhabi were also quite critical of Sufi mysticism. Wahhabism is the basis for many Muslim traditionalist movements, and more literalistic forms of Islam, in the contemporary world. It is no more representative of all of Islam than fundamentalist Christianity is of all of Christian history and culture.

Islam and the Modern World - While Islam is a universal religion which stresses unity amongst its followers, there is still a great deal of diversity in the nature of Islam, how it is practiced, and how it relates to political concerns. The Shi'ite Revolution in Iran is clearly a turning point in the history of Shi'ism. Likewise, recent tensions between the nation-state of Israel and the Palestinians have a profound impact on relations between nations in the Muslim world. Islam in Indonesia continues to develop new mystic forms, as well as being a major political (and growing economic) force in Southeast Asia. The tensions between Muslims and militant Hindus in India is a dangerous and tragic situation which shows few signs of resolution. The international acceptance and influence of Black Muslims in America, and of immigrant Islam, is rapidly expanding. Soon Islam will be the second most largest religion in the United States. The Nation of Islam, led by Louis Farrakhan, is not accepted by world-wide Muslims as a genuine form of Islam. Islam is, therefore, not a monolith, but rather a location of dramatic diversity.