

The Religion of Islam

“This day have I perfected your religion for you and completed My favour unto you, and have chosen for you as your religion Islam.” (Quran, Surah V:3)

Introduction

Islam is a religion based upon the surrender to God who is One. The very name of the religion, *alislam* in Arabic, means at once submission and peace, for it is in submitting to God’s Will that human beings gain peace in their lives in this world and in the hereafter. The message of Islam concerns God, who in Arabic is called Allah, and it addresses itself to humanity’s most profound nature. It concerns men and women as they are created by God—not as fallen beings. Islam therefore considers itself to be not an innovation but a reassertion of the universal truth of all revelation which is God’s Oneness.

This truth was asserted by the prophets of old and especially by Abraham, the father of monotheism. Islam reveres all of these prophets including not only Abraham, who is the father of the Arabs as well as of the Jews, but also Moses and Christ. The Prophet and Messenger of God, Muhammad—may peace and blessings be upon him, his family and his companions—, was the last of this long line of prophets and Islam is the last religion until the Day of Judgement. It is the final expression of the Abrahamic tradition. One should in fact speak of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, for Islam shared with the other Abrahamic religions their sacred history, the basic ethical teachings contained in the Ten Commandments and above all, belief in the One God. And it renews and repeats the true beliefs of Jews and Christians whose scriptures are mentioned as divinely revealed books in Islam’s own sacred book, the Quran.

The Quran

For Muslims, or followers of Islam, the Quran is the actual Word of God revealed through the archangel Gabriel to the Prophet of Islam during the twenty-three year period of his prophetic mission. It was revealed in the Arabic language as a sonoral revelation which the Prophet repeated to his companions. Arabic became therefore the language of Islam even for non-Arab Muslims. Under the direction of the Prophet, the verses and chapters were organized in the order known to Muslims to this day. There is only one text of the Quran accepted by all schools of Islamic thought and there are no variants.

The Quran is the central sacred reality of Islam. The sound of the Quran is the first and last sound that a Muslim hears in this life. As the direct Word of God and the embodiment of God’s Will, the Quran is considered as the guide par excellence for the life of Muslims. It is the source of all Islamic doctrines and ethics. Both the intellectual aspects of Islam and Islamic Law have their source in the Quran. Perhaps there is no book revered by any human collectivity as much as the Quran is revered by Muslims. Essentially a religion of the book, Islam sees all authentic religions as being associated with a scripture. That is why Muslims call Christians and Jews “people of the book.”

Throughout all its chapters and verses, the Quran emphasizes the significance of knowledge and encourages Muslims to learn and to acquire knowledge not only of God's laws and religious injunctions, but also of the world of nature. The Quran refers, in a language rich in its varied terminology, to the importance of seeing, contemplating, and reasoning about the world of creation and its diverse phenomena. It places the gaining of knowledge as the highest religious activity, one that is most pleasing in God's eyes. That is why wherever the message of the Quran was accepted and understood, the quest for knowledge flourished.

The Prophet of Islam

The Prophet of Islam is loved and revered by Muslims precisely because he was chosen by God to reveal His Word to mankind. The Prophet Muhammad is not considered to be divine but a human being. However, he is seen as the most perfect of human beings, shining like a jewel among stones. He was born in 570 A.D. in one of the most powerful tribes in the Arabia of that time, for it had guardianship over the Ka'bah in Makkah. An orphan brought up by his grandfather and later by his uncles, the young Muhammad displayed exceptional virtue as a trustworthy individual whom members of various tribes would invite to act as arbitrator in their disputes.

At that time the Arabs followed a form of idolatry, each tribe keeping its own idols at the Ka'bah, the cubical structure built originally by Abraham to celebrate the glory of the One God. But the monotheistic message of Abraham had long become forgotten among the general population of the Arabian peninsula. The young Muhammad, however, was believer in the One God all of his life and never participated in the idolatrous practices of his tribe.

When forty years old, during one of the retreats which he made habitually in a cave on top of a mountain outside Makkah, Muhammad first saw the archangel Gabriel who revealed God's Word to him, the Qumran, and announced that Muhammad is the messenger of God. For the next thirteen years, he preached the Word of God to the Makkans, inviting them to abandon idolatry and accept the religion of Oneness. A few accepted his call but most Makkans, especially those of his own tribe, opposed him violently, seeing in the new religion a grave danger to their economic as well as social domination based upon their control of the Ka'bah. But the Prophet continued to call the people to Islam and gradually a larger number of men and women began to accept the faith and submit themselves to its teachings. As a result, persecution of Muslims increased until the Prophet was forced to send some of his companions to Abyssinia where they were protected by the Christian king..

The Makkan period was also one of intense spiritual experience for the Prophet and the noble companions who formed the nucleus of the new religious community which was soon spread worldwide. It was during this period that God ordered the direction of prayers to be changed from Jerusalem to Makkah. To this day Jerusalem remains along with Makkah and Madinah one of the holiest cities of Islam.

In 622 A.D. the Prophet was ordered by God to migrate to Yathrib, a city north of Makkah. He followed the Divine Command and left with his followers for that city which henceforth was known as "The City of the Prophet" (*Madinat al-nabi*) or simply Madinah. This event was so momentous that the Islamic calendar begins with this migration (*hijrah*).

In Madinah, the Prophet established the first Islamic societies which served as the model for all later Islamic societies. Several battles took place against the invading Makkans which the Muslims won against great odds. Soon more tribes began to join Islam and within a few years most of Arabia had embraced the religion of Islam.

After many trials and eventually successive victories, the Prophet, returned triumphantly to Makkah where the people embraced Islam at last. He forgave all his former enemies and marched to the

Ka'bah, where he ordered his companions and cousin 'Ali to join him in destroying all the idols. The Prophet reconstituted the rite of pilgrimage as founded by Abraham. The Prophet then returned to Madinah and made another pilgrimage to Makkah. It was upon returning from this last pilgrimage that he delivered his farewell address. Soon he fell ill and after three days died in 632 A.D. in Madinah where he was buried in the chamber of his house next to the first mosque of Islam.

The practices and traditions (*Sunnah*) of the Prophet which includes his sayings (*Hadith*) became the guide for Muslims in the understanding of the Quran and the practice of their religion. The Quran itself asserts that God has chosen in the Prophet an example for Muslims to follow. Besides this emulation of the Prophet in all aspects of life and thought, his sayings were assembled by various scholars. Finally they were codified in books of *Hadith* where the authentic were separated from the spurious. The *Sunnah* has always remained, after the Quran, the second source of everything Islamic.

What is Islamic Religion?

According to a famous saying of the Prophet Islam consists of five pillars which are as follows: affirmation of the faith (*shahadah*), that is, witnessing that *La ilaha illa'Llah* (There is no divinity but Allah) and *Muhammadun rasul Allah* (Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah); the five daily prayers (*al-salat*) which Muslims perform facing Makkah; fasting (*al-sawn*) from dawn to sunset during the month of Ramadan; making the pilgrimage to Makkah (*al-hajj*) at least once in a lifetime if one's financial and physical conditions permit it; and paying 2 1/2% tax (*al-zakat*) on one's capital which is used for the needs of the community. Muslims are also commanded to exhort others to perform good acts and to abstain from evil. Ethics lies at the heart of Islamic teachings and all men and women are expected to act ethically towards each other at all times. As the Prophet has said, "None of you is a believer until you love for your brother what you love for yourself."

As for faith according to Islam (*al-iman*), it means having faith in God, His angels, His books, His messengers, the Day of Judgement and God's determination of human destiny. It is important to understand that the definition of *al-iman* refers to books and prophets in the plural thus pointing directly to the universality of revelation and respect for other religions emphasized so much in the Quran. There is also the important concept, *alihsan* or virtue, which means to worship God as if one sees Him, knowing that even if one does not see Him, He sees us. It means to remember God at all times and marks the highest level of being a Muslim.

Islamic Law (*al-Shari'ah*)

Islam possesses a religious law called *al-Shari'ah* in Arabic which governs the life of Muslims and which Muslims consider to be the embodiment of the Will of God. The *Shar'ah* is contained in principle in the Quran as elaborated and complemented by the *Sunnah*. On the basis of these principles the schools of law which are followed by all Muslims to this day were developed early in Islamic history. This Law, while being rooted in the sources of the Islamic revelation, is a living body of law which caters to the needs of Islamic society.

Islamic laws are essentially preventative and are not based on harsh punishment except as a last measure. The faith of the Muslim causes him to have respect for the rights of others and Islamic Law is such that it prevents transgression from taking place in most instances. That is why what people consider to be harsh punishments are so rarely in need of being applied.

The Spread of Islam

From the oasis cities of Makkah and Madinah in the Arabian desert, the message of Islam went forth with electrifying speed. Within half a century of the Prophet's death, Islam had spread to three continents. Islam is not, as some imagine in the West, a religion of the sword nor did it spread

primarily by means of war. It was only within Arabia, where a crude form of idolatry was rampant, that Islam was propagated by warring against those tribes which did not accept the message of God—whereas Christians and Jews were not forced to convert. Outside of Arabia also the vast lands conquered by the Arab armies in a short period became Muslim not by force of the sword but by appeal of the new religion. It was faith in One God and emphasis upon His Mercy that brought vast numbers of people into the fold of Islam. The new religion did not coerce people to convert. Many continued to remain Jews and Christians and to this day important communities of the followers of these faiths are found in Muslim lands.

Moreover, the spread of Islam was not limited to its miraculous early expansion outside of Arabia. During later centuries the Turks embraced Islam peacefully as did a large number of the people of the Indian subcontinent and the Malay-speaking world. In Africa also, Islam has spread during the past two centuries even under the mighty power of European colonial rulers. Today Islam continues to grow not only in Africa but also in Europe and America where Muslims now comprise a notable minority.

Five Pillars of Islam

- Affirmation of the faith in the One God and in the
- Prophet Muhammad as His messenger (*shahadah*)
- Daily prayers (*salat*)
- Payment of 2 ½% tax (*zakat*)
- Fasting during the month of Ramadan (*sawn*)
- Pilgrimage to Makkah (*hajj*)