

ISLAM

A Brief Introduction

ALLAH - for Muslims the greatest and most inclusive of the Names of God, an Arabic word of rich and varied meaning, denoting the one who is adored in worship, who creates all that exists, who had priority over all creation, who is lofty and hidden, who confounds all human understanding. It is exactly the same word that the Jews, in Hebrew, use for God (*eloh*), the word which Jesus Christ used in Aramaic when he prayed to God. God has an identical name in Judaism, Christianity and Islam; Allah is the same God worshiped by Muslims, Christians and Jews.

"He is God, the One God Independent and sought by all; He begets not, nor is begotten, and there is none like unto Him" (The Holy Qur 'an - Chapter on Sincerity of Faith)

Islam teaches that all faiths have, in essence, one common message:

the existence of a Supreme Being, the one and only God, whose Sovereignty is to be acknowledged in worship and in the pledge to obey His teaching and commandments, conveyed through His messengers and prophets who were sent at various times and in many places throughout history.

Islam, An Arabic word, rich in meaning. One important dimension is the "commitment to submit and surrender to God so that one can live in peace"; Peace (*Salam*) is achieved through active obedience to the revealed Commandments of God, for God is the Source of all Peace. Commitment to *Islam* entails striving for peace through a struggle for justice, equality of opportunity, mutual caring and consideration for the rights of others, and continuous research and acquisition of knowledge for the better protection and utilization of the resources of Creation.

Islam teaches that the objective of the Commandment of God is that peace should be established in the human societies of this world, in preparation for a further dimension of human existence in the world to come, the Afterlife. *Islam's* vision of peace is therefore **truly universal**; it transcends time and belongs to the order of God's eternity.

Islam does not regard itself to be a new teaching, different or separate from that of other world religions. It is the reaffirmation of the ancient yet living truth of all religions, which can be expressed in the following beliefs:

- the Uniqueness of the one and only God who is Sovereign of the universe;
- the Revelation of the teaching and commandments of God through Angels in heaven to Prophets on earth, and written in sacred writings which all have the same transcendent source; these contain the will of God which marks the way of peace for the whole universe and all of humankind;
- The Day of Judgment which inaugurates the Afterlife, in which God rewards and punishes with respect to human obedience and disobedience to His will.

Islam affirms these simple beliefs as the basis for the decent, civilized society towards which it strives. Its vision of society is; in essence, no different from that upheld by all monotheistic religions. This is particularly true of Judaism and Christianity, which share with *Islam* the direct spiritual lineage of the Prophet Abraham. *Islam* affirms the divinely ordained missions of the Prophet Moses, through whom God revealed the sacred scripture called the Torah, and of the Prophet Jesus, through whom God revealed the scripture known as the Gospel. **The message of Islam is in** essence the same as that which God revealed to all His prophets and messengers. The Prophet Muhammad (the peace and blessing of God be upon him) was commanded to recite in the Holy Qur'an:

"Say, we believe in God, and that which was revealed unto us, and that which was revealed unto Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which was vouchsafed unto Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord; We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered" (The Holy Qur 'an 3.84)

The success of civilizations and cultures is directly related to the extent of their practice of the righteous way of life revealed in the teaching and commandments of God, and set forth in the monotheistic religions which are confirmed by *Is'an'*. God's revelation enshrines the highest values of humankind, and the divine commandments are essentially no different from the values which human beings have cherished and striven to maintain throughout history, regardless of cultural, racial, linguistic and socioeconomic differences. Success in this life is directly related to the practice of these values.

The irreducible minimum of faith is to believe in **God as the sole** sovereign Lord of this world and the next, **and to** believe in the reality of the Afterlife for which human beings are to prepare by living righteously in this world. God Alone is the Judge of human righteousness, and it is God **Alone who** rewards and punishes in this life and in the life hereafter.

Righteousness does not mean for you to turn your faces towards the East and towards the West, but righteousness means one should believe in God (Alone), the Last Day, the angels, the Book and the prophets; and no matter how he loves it, to give his wealth away to near relatives, orphans, the needy, the wayfarer and the beggars, and toward the freeing of captives, and to keep up prayer and pay the welfare tax, and those who keep their word whenever they promise anything; and are patient under strain and hardship and in time of peril Those are the ones who act royally and perform their duty. (The Holy Qur'an 2:177)

A *Muslim* is one who is committed to peace continuously striving to follow the way of righteousness and justice revealed by God; the Arabic word *muslim* refers to a man, *muslima* to a woman. In either case the literal meaning is "one who submits to God's teachings and commandments, which leads to peace."

Muslims have three distinct advantages to help them in the practice of *Islam* as their way of life:

1. The Sacred Scripture called the *Qur'an*, **which was** revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in the 7th century of the Common Era, and which, after 1400 years, remains authentic in its original Arabic text, in the language which is still used and understood by millions of people throughout the world today; it contains God's guidance in teachings and commandments which are valid for all times and all places, and which encompass all spheres of human life.
2. The Prophet Muhammad, whom the *Qur'an* names as "the Seal (last) of the Prophets", and of whose life and mission there is a complete and authentic record in the *Sira* and the *Hadith*. These show how he exemplified the teachings and commandments of God in practice, and elaborated the principles laid down in the *Qur'an* in order to provide a sure guidance for their interpretation and application for all later times and societies.
3. The Sacred Law, called the *Shari'ah*, **which sets** out the way of worship prescribed in the *Qur'an* and the Prophet's practice; it goes beyond the common understanding of worship as the performance of religious rituals, and encompasses the whole of human life, individual as well as social. Thus all so-called secular activities become acts of worship, provided they are performed with pure and righteous intention, seeking God's pleasure.

Muslims are enjoined to organize their lives on the basis of a series of ritual acts of worship which are ordained in the *Qur'an* as ways which discipline human beings to remember God constantly, accepting his Sovereignty and pledging to obey His commandments:

1. **Declaration of belief (Shahada):** this is the initial act of faith, expressed in a simple statement which testifies to one's commitment to following the straight path of God's guidance upon which Muslims seek to live their lives;

*"I bear witness that there is no god but God;
I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant
and His Prophet. "*

2. **Prayer (Salat)**, offered five times a day, has the effect of reminding the faithful that "remembrance of God is indeed the greatest virtue", and helps them adhere to the path of righteousness, and to restrain from indecency and evil.
3. **Fasting (Sawm)**, observed through the daylight hours of the 29/30 days of the Islamic month of Ramadan, involves abstinence from eating, drinking, smoking and marital intercourse; this reminds the believers of their dependence upon God, as well as their kinship with, and responsibility for the millions of human beings in the world who experience involuntary fasting because of lack of food, or its unjust distribution.
4. **Purification of wealth (Zakat)**; this requires the annual giving of a fixed amount of excess personal assets for the benefit of the poor, the incapacitated, the deprived, and the welfare of the community; it serves to remind Muslims that all beneficence comes from the bounty of God, and is enjoyed only through His mercy; sharing becomes an act of purification both of the wealth itself, and of the giver whose soul is disciplined against greed by the practice of selflessness.
5. **Pilgrimage (Hajj)**, which all Muslims should perform at least once in a lifetime, if personal circumstances permit; it gathers the believers as members of the diverse human family into a single community. They perform prescribed acts of worship at the Holy House of the *Ka'ba* in Makkah (Mecca) which, according to the Qur'an, was originally built by the prophet Abraham and his son Ishmael; and at Mount Arafat, where they remember the pure and original way of life of Adam, the progenitor of the human race, reaffirmed by the Patriarch of the entire human family, the Prophet Abraham, and finally perfected and completed by God for all humanity through the mission of the Prophet Muhammad - the way of life known as *Islam* which has at its heart the doctrine of the unity and uniqueness of the One God.

Each of these prescribed acts of worship brings Muslims daily and repeatedly before God Almighty as the Creator, Sustainer and Judge of all humanity.

Through these acts of worship, God helps Muslims to fulfill the obligation of striving which he has ordained for this life; the striving actively and freely to surrender one's own will in obedience to the Will of God, inwardly in intention and outwardly in word and deed; individually in personal conduct and collectively in the improvement of society; the striving for peace in the world through the proclamation of true faith, and its defense against all that threatens it.

Islam presents human beings with a simple two-fold invitation:

- to witness that there is no God but God Almighty;
- to witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.

This declaration is the door to a life of service. One of participation in a community of believers whose highest duty is to call on humanity to embrace what is righteous and good and to reject what is evil and degrading. **Muslims** are brothers and sisters of all people of good faith, and wish to strive with them for peace in this world.

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