

THE ISLAMIC TRADITION

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[This early 1990s document was included in a packet designed to provide a very basic orientation to Islam for the purposes of discussion in church groups.]

Islam is the second largest of the religious traditions in the world. It has over 850,000,000 adherents. While the Islamic world includes Muslim countries stretching from North Africa to Southeast Asia, significant numbers of Muslims may be found throughout the entire world. There are, for example, approximately 60,000,000 Muslims in the Soviet Union and over 90,000,000 in Africa.

Historically, Islam is often viewed as a religious tradition which originated in seventh century Arabia with the prophet Muhammad (586-632 C.E.) and the divine revelation which he received from God that is recorded in the *Qur'an*. However, it is most important to realize that Muslims do not view Islam as a new religion. Muslims believe that Allah (which literally means "The God" in Arabic) is the same God who revealed himself to Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Therefore, Jews, Christians, and Muslims are all followers of the same living God - cousins in a common family with a common ancestor, Abraham. Muslims believe that the *Qur'an* is the final and complete revelation of God to all people.

The central fact of the Muslim religious experience is Allah. The God of the *Qur'an* is one and transcendent, creator and sustainer of the universe, and the overwhelming concern of the believer. The word *Islam* means "submission"; a Muslim is one who submits to God, one who is a servant of God. This is not a mere passivity; rather, it is submission to the Divine Will, a duty to realize actively God's will in history. Thus, the *Qur'an* teaches that God has given the earth to man as a "divine trust" and that it is a person's duty and mission, as God's agent, to strive to realize God's will.

The Muslim's divinely mandated vocation is communal as well as individual. The Islamic community or state (*ummah*) is the dynamic vehicle for the realization of God's will and, as such, should serve as an example to the rest of the world, since all humanity is called to worship and serve the one God. Today, there are two major groups in the Muslim community which resulted from an early dispute over succession to Mohammad's leadership, the Sunni who constitutes 85% of Muslims, and the Shi'i, who are found in many parts of the world.

Muslims look first to the *Qur'an* which contains God's commands and second to the example (*Sunnah*) of the prophet Muhammad who serves as the embodiment of Islamic values, as a living model for the community. Traditions or reports (*Hadith*) of the prophet's words and deeds were preserved and written down by the early Muslim community. On the basis of these two sources, the Islamic way of life was developed and expressed comprehensively in the *Shari'ah* - Islamic law. *Shari'ah* literally means "the path," the road or way that all Muslims are to follow. Muslim law reflects the fact that Islam is a total way of life in which there is an organic relationship between religion, politics, and society.

Islam emphasizes practice over belief. As a result, law, not theology, has always been the most important area of concern to Muslims, for it provides the "straight path" (*Shari'ah*) which the Muslim must follow to realize God's Will. At the heart of the law are five fundamental obligations or duties which constitute the five pillars of Islam: 1) the confession of faith, 2) worship, 3) sharing of wealth, 4) fasting, and 5) the pilgrimage to Mecca.

A Muslim is one who confesses that there is no God but God and that Muhammad is the messenger of God. Islam affirms a radical monotheism in which the doctrine of the oneness of God is dominant. God is the creator, ruler, and judge of the world. He is merciful and compassionate, but He is also a just judge. On the last day, He will judge each person according to his/her actions, all of which are contained in the Book of Deeds.

The second part of the confession of faith is the affirmation of Muhammad as the messenger of God, the last and final prophet, who serves as a model for the Muslim community. Though he is the ideal Muslim as husband, father, leader, and judge, he was human not divine.

Muslims are called to prayer five times each day (dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and evening) by the *muezzin* who stands atop the tower (minaret) of the mosque. This is preceded by ablution, a cleansing of the body which purifies and thus prepares the Muslim for entering the presence of God. Facing the holy city of Mecca, Muslims worship by standing, kneeling, and prostrating while reciting verses from the *Qur'an*. On Friday, the noon prayer should be said preferably at a mosque with a congregation. At other times, any place where a Muslim prays is acceptable; a mosque is not a consecrated building but rather a place of gathering. Since there are no priesthood and no sacraments in Islam, any Muslim may lead the prayer and may officiate at weddings, burials, etc. Though there is no clergy, a clerical class did develop consisting of religious scholars (*ulama*) and local religious leaders (*mullahs*).

Alms-giving or the sharing of wealth institutionalizes a sense of social responsibility by establishing a fixed proportionate (2 ½%) wealth tax. It requires the more fortunate members of the Islamic community to share their wealth with their less fortunate brothers.

Once every year, Islam prescribes a rigorous fast throughout the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. During this period, abstention from food, drink, and sex (from sunrise to sunset) is required of all healthy adult Muslims. The emphasis is not on self-mortification and abstinence, as such, but rather on self-discipline and reflection. The end of Ramadan is marked by a feast of the breaking of the fast (*'Id al-Fitr*).

Every adult Muslim, physically and financially able, is expected to perform the duty of the pilgrimage (*Hajj*) at least once in his/her lifetime. Just as five times each day Muslims throughout the world are united as they face Mecca in worship, so each year many travel physically to Mecca, sacred city of Islam, where they have travelled spiritually. The equality of the pilgrimage is symbolized by exchanging one's ordinary clothing for the *ihram*, a white seamless garment.

Islam, then, provides its followers with an integrated, holistic way of life which was revealed by the God of Abraham, Isaac, Moses, and Jesus to Muhammad one final time and which was subsequently recorded in the *Qur'an*. As believers in the same God and as children of Abraham, Jews, Christians, and Muslims share more than a common geographic origin in the Middle East. Their challenge today is to understand better this common religious heritage and to draw closer not only as individuals but as communities of believers who face many similar problems in the modern world and who possess one unifying goal - world peace and justice.

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