

Islam: A Historical, Practical and Doctrinal Overview

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The Origins of Islam: the Early Years in Mecca

From the perspective of modern scholarship in the western academy, the religion of Islam began around 610 C. E., when Muhammad received the first, startling revelations of the Qur'an from the angel Gabriel on Mount Hira: Recite: In the Name of thy Lord who created, created Man of a blood-clot. Recite: And the Lord is the Most Generous, who taught by the Pen, taught Man that which he knew not. Although Muslims recognize the first revelation of the Qur'an as marking the advent of a new religious dispensation in human history, they would suggest that Islam, which means submission or surrender, remains a primordial condition of a spiritual attitude towards God, named Allah, and a corresponding social ethic. For Muslims, this message has been expressed in the Creator's communication with humanity since the time of Adam to the present. In this way, Islam appeared as a fulfillment and completion of the recognized, earlier monotheistic religions of the Middle East, Judaism and Christianity. While introducing Islam as a historically occurring religious tradition, it is nonetheless important and useful to acknowledge this perspective in the self-understanding of its adherents.

Orphaned at an early age, Muhammad worked in the lucrative commercial trade network of Mecca, an important city in the Arabian Peninsula. His work was enabled by his marriage to a wealthy widow, Khadija. He developed a reputation as an upright, honest man, earning the honorific al-Amin or the Trustworthy. However, Muhammad gradually grew disillusioned with life in Mecca, especially because of the pagan polytheism, which was the dominant religion, and with the social inequality and oppression of the society. He began to withdraw for periods of retreat to neighboring hills outside Mecca to fast and reflect, seeking answers to fundamental questions. Visions appeared to him on his meditative walks. They culminated with the dramatic appearance of Gabriel exhorting him to recite and be guided by the higher truths of Allah's existence. These revelations were to continue for some twenty-three years.

Initially, Muhammad shared his revelations and the message given to him only with his wife and a few friends and associates. Together, this small group formed a religious circle dedicated to ritual prayer, piety, and ethical nobility. After a couple of years, Muhammad received a verse commanding him to rise and warn his society of the dangers of neglecting to worship Allah exclusively, of ignoring the day of reckoning for one's deeds, of oppressing the weak, and of pursuing excessive individual gain. Muhammad began to spread this message publicly, thus challenging the social and religious order of Mecca; at first, the

message was not well received. For twelve years, Muhammad worked hard to spread the message, but recruited only about a hundred new adherents to the faith; most of these were from the disadvantaged members of Meccan society. Muhammad was ostracized and threatened. During this period, his social support disappeared with the deaths of his beloved wife Khadija and his Uncle Abu Talib who had been a father figure in his life.

The Hijra to Medina

It was under these dire circumstances that Muhammad received an invitation to go to Medina, an agricultural town a few days' journey to the north of Mecca. The migration (called the hijra in Arabic) saved the Prophet and marked the establishment of the Muslim community on a new footing. The Muslim calendar begins with the date of the Hijra to Medina. The refugees from Mecca who accompanied Muhammad to Medina and those natives of Medina who converted to Islam formed a strong social base upon which to build a collective, developing Muslim life. Muhammad's role developed from the spiritual guide to a small following to the leader of a growing community oriented around the social and religious vision of Islam.

Over the course of the next ten years, Muhammad served as both a religious leader and a statesman, recruiting a tribal confederation that was bound by the belief system of Islam and who recognized him as the messenger of God. This *umma*, or community of Muslim faithfuls, struggled against the powerful tribes of Mecca and eventually overpowered them. This resulted in Muhammad's peaceful entrance into Mecca with a large Muslim force.

The Return to Mecca

The Meccans realized their defeat and converted to Islam. The Ka'bah, which was a huge cube-shaped shrine filled with idols used by the polytheists who had reigned over Mecca, was purged of idols. The Ka'bah became venerated as the House of Allah and became the object of the yearly Muslim pilgrimage known as the Hajj. By the end of Muhammad's life, the tribes of Arabia were united as a community of believers for the first time under a *pax Islamica*. After the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 C. E., a series of four representatives from among his closest associates assumed the leadership role of the Muslim community and proto-state. These leaders were known as the Caliphs.

The Spread of Islam

During the years following the Prophet's death, the Arabs were faced with border conflicts with neighboring empire states, such as the Byzantine and Sassanian empires. Eventually, these border skirmishes turned into full-scale conflicts. The Muslim Arab armies overpowered the neighboring imperial armies and swiftly moved out of the Arabian Peninsula and into the Fertile Crescent

region. The Sassanian Empire, which had ruled over Persia, collapsed. The Byzantine Empire lost its Egyptian and Levantine provinces, but maintained a presence in Anatolia until the 11th century.

Thus the Muslim *umma* was quickly transformed. At the time of the death of the Prophet, the *umma* occupied a small Arab state at the periphery of the established centers of Middle Eastern civilization. By the end of the 7th century, it came to have a large influence over a diverse and expansive area with diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities. Desert Bedouins had become rulers of a cosmopolitan empire. However, Islam spread gradually through a historical process of conversion. Initially, the Arab Muslims refrained from proselytizing; the Prophet had stated, There is no compulsion in matters of religion. It took several generations for Islam to become the majority religion of the region. Jews and Christians remained protected religious communities since they were considered People of the Book. The message of the Prophet was gradually adapted to the varying historical circumstances in which the growing Muslim community, or *umma*, found itself.

The Practice of Islam as a Belief System

Islam informs the whole range of the personal and public lives of its conscientious adherents; to them it is a comprehensive social and spiritual program. Muslims, ideally derive guidance in all matters of personal conduct, ethics, and belief; ritual practices and worship; and social, political, economic and legal affairs from Islam, which expands the notion of religion to a whole mode of existence. Islam resembles both Judaism and Christianity in many respects, since it participates in the same Judeo-Christian tradition. It may be more accurate to refer to a Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition. However, the relationships between belief, practice and social community differ somewhat between these religious traditions both in terms of historical development and dogma.

Such characterizations are, of course, very general, and it must be emphasized that there is a great diversity in the beliefs and practices of all three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Islam has been embraced as the mode of life for almost 1500 years, and it is practiced in the Philippines, Indonesia, China, India, Africa, Europe, the United States, and the Middle East. Naturally, there is great diversity in the practice of the Islamic faith. Moreover, Islam has not created an organized ecclesiastical structure or a system of sacramental rites involving a priesthood to mediate human relations with the divine. Since there is no church or similar religious organization to promote a definition of orthodoxy, disagreement on religious matters among religious scholars has marked Muslim societies to the extent that four major legal schools recognize one another as being equally valid.

The Five Pillars of Islam

However, the fundamental values and vision of Islam in all its varieties exhibits a meaningful unity and coherence. The common core practices and shared tradition that constitutes Islam are the five pillars. These include *shahada* or the profession of faith; *salaat* or ritual prayer; *sawm* or fasting during the month of Ramadan; *zakat* or charitable tithe; and the Hajj or annual pilgrimage to Mecca.

To state the *shahada* is to declare one's recognition of Allah and one's identity as a Muslim. In translation, the statement reads, There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. Upon uttering this statement with truthful intention, the speaker is minimally considered a member of the Muslim community.

Salaat is the organized ritual prayer which can be performed either individually or in a group. The prayer takes place five times a day: morning, noon or early afternoon, late afternoon, sunset, and night. It can be performed anywhere but is often done in the mosques, or Muslim houses of worship. The prayer consists of a series of recitations from the Qur'an, credal formulations, statements invoking divine attributes, and praises to the Prophets Abraham and Muhammad. It is spoken in Arabic. While saying the prayer, one must face in the direction of the Ka'bah in Mecca and assume different positions throughout the prayer: standing with arms crossed, bowing with one's back flat and hands on the knees, and prostrating on the prayer mat or rug.

Every year during the holy month of Ramadan, Muslims engage in a religious fast. Ramadan is the month in which the Qur'an was first revealed. The Muslim calendar is lunar, and each month is 29 or 30 days. Consequently, the lunar year is 9 — 10 days shorter than the solar year. The month of Ramadan, then, moves earlier about 10 days each year and slowly migrates through all the seasons. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims refrain from food, drink, and sexual intercourse during the day, from an hour before sunrise until sunset. The fast is traditionally broken with a communal meal following the sunset prayer. The fast is a time of purification, charity, and reflection. It is also a festive holiday in Muslim countries. The end of the month is commemorated with a special communal prayer, celebration, and a public festival called the 'Id al-Fitr.

Charitable offerings are strongly encouraged in Islam for a variety of purposes from supporting the needy, providing dowries for marriage, establishing mosques, creating facilities for travelers, and supporting students. Muslims are required to make a minimum payment of two and a half percent of their savings annually for the care of the poor.

Finally, the fifth pillar or the Hajj is the annual pilgrimage to the Ka'bah in Mecca. The pilgrimage involves various rituals and prayers. All able-bodied

Muslims who can afford to are required to take the Hajj at least once in their lifetime. Pilgrims go around the Ka bah, the House of Allah, which the Muslims believe was built by Abraham and his son Ishmael. The Hajj culminates with the second major religious festival, the 'Id al-Adha or festival of sacrifice. Muslims sacrifice a flock animal (usually a lamb) in remembrance of Abraham's substitution of an animal for the sacrifice of his son (believed to be Ishmael in the Muslim tradition rather than Isaac as in the biblical tradition). The meat is then charitably distributed to the poor.

These five pillars constitute the fundamental religious activities carried out by pious Muslims. They share many features common to other religious traditions, especially Judaism and Christianity. Muslim beliefs, doctrines, and theology likewise resonate closely with those of the People of the Book, but with significant differences.

The Doctrines of Islam

Although sophisticated theological debates complicate any outline of Muslim beliefs, the doctrines of Islam can be usefully reduced to the fundamental credal formulas found in the Qur'an.

To Allah belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth; and whether you reveal what is in your heart or conceal it, you will have to account for it to Allah who will pardon whom He pleases and punishes whom He will, for Allah has power over all things.

The Prophet believes in what has been revealed to him by His Lord, as do the believers. Each one believes in Allah, His angels, His Books and the Prophets, and We make no distinctions between the Apostles. For they say, We hear and obey, and we seek Your forgiveness, O Lord, for to You we shall journey in the end. (2:284-5)

These two verses of the Qur'an encapsulate the central, defining doctrines of the Muslim faith. The simple litany of the creed in the heart of the passage illustrates the content of what constitutes belief. The statements surrounding it reveal Allah's nature more fully and move to the attitude faithful Muslims should take in recognizing Allah and surrendering to his will.

The Prophet believes in what has been revealed to him by his Lord, as do the believers. This refers not only to the formula that follows, but also to the revelation. The revelation is the Qur'an, the sacred scripture of Islam, which is believed to be the word and speech of Allah as conveyed by the Angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad.

The litany begins with the belief in Allah, described in the earlier verse as the creator of the celestial and terrestrial worlds. He can also dispose of them. He is omniscient, omnipotent, and transcendent. Elsewhere the Qur'an describes Allah as unique, singular, and without progeny or origin. Islam adheres to a strict monotheistic view of the Deity, rejecting association or partnership in divinity or the idea of the Trinity. The creed continues, mentioning the angels who signify more generally the world of the unseen. It also mentions His Books and the Prophets. Muhammad is regarded as the seal of the Prophets, that is the final messenger from God. However, Islam recognizes previous religious dispensations as expressions of the divine will and guidance in human history. Muslims understand His Books and Prophets as previously revealed scriptures of earlier religions, notably the Torah of Judaism and the Gospels of Christianity, brought by the prophets, including the Old Testament patriarchs and Jesus. All are considered equally prophets of Allah. In Muslim belief, however, the corruption of the previous scriptures over time in human hands and the straying from divine guidance has necessitated the appearance of Muhammad, the final messenger, and the culminating scripture, the Qur'an.

Sources of Religious Authority

The primary source of religious authority is the Qur'an, the Muslim sacred scripture. The text of the Qur'an is short and compressed. It does not follow a straightforward narrative or legal code. It requires substantial interpretation.

The second major canonical source of guidance for Muslims are the directives and example of the Prophet Muhammad. His life is thought to illustrate the will of God in human history. Early on, the companions of the Prophet modeled their behavior after that of the Prophet. The normative practice of the Prophet that could be taken as a model was known as the *sunna*. These companions began to report their experiences to later generations of Muslims in the form of oral reports called the *hadith*. The *hadith* contain the words of the Prophet or the anecdotal description of his deeds. These oral reports were circulated through a chain of oral transmissions in the next several generations before being compiled and written.

These two sources, the Qur'an and the *sunna*, are the basis for the Muslim religious law or *shari'a*. They defined the Muslim way of life more fully in the new contexts into which Islam had spread over the conquests.

Sectarian Divides in Islam

The major sectarian divide between Shiite and Sunni Muslims began with a difference over political and religious leadership over the Muslim community after the Prophet's death. The divide has continued through history to define different attitudes toward the sources of religious guidance and authority in the

Muslim community. The Shiites favored 'Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law and cousin, and did not accept the first three Caliphs as legitimate successors of the Prophet. They ultimately suggested that continuing divine guidance must come through the appointed descendants of the Prophet. The Sunnis, on the other hand, accepted a more restricted religious role for the leaders of the Muslim community. For the Sunnis, the consensus of the community's interpretation of religious texts and the Prophet's example helped to define the Muslim way of life. In matters of doctrine, therefore, significant differences remain between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. In matters of religious practice and the content of religious law, however, only minor differences exist between the two. The majority of Muslims are adherents of Sunnism.

Gradually, a scholarly class of religious specialists emerged to help guide Muslims in the ways to apply the religious texts and doctrine to their daily lives. Islam, however, does not neglect the spiritual and devotional dimensions of human consciousness. Pious Muslims have infused their ritual obligations with spiritual meaning. Sufism, or Muslim mysticism, developed and organized into orders or brotherhoods. The Sufis designed special additional practices that enhanced self-examination of the soul and prepared it for spiritual, mystical experiences. These activities included asceticism, bodily mortification, fasting, meditative prayer, recitation, and chanting of Allah's name. Many Sufis engaged in ecstatic spiritual experience, while others preferred a more sober and reflective spiritual life. Sufism encompassed a variety of spiritual organizations and practices. It also inspired some of Muslim civilization's greatest literature and poetry.