

ISLAM: BACKGROUND AND BASIC BELIEFS

Western Canon 1 | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu)

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful. / Say: He, Allah, is One. / Allah is He on Whom all depend. / He begets not, nor is He begotten. / And none is like Him. (112: 1-4)

Islam (literally, “submission to God”) is centered on the text of the **Qur’an**, which orthodox **Muslims** (“those who submit to God”) hold is the literal word of **Allah** (the Arabic word for “God,” used by Muslims as well as Arabic-speaking Jews/Christians). Specifically, they hold that the Arabic text of the Qur’an was revealed by the angel Gabriel to the prophet **Mohammed** between 610 and 632 CE in and around the cities of Mecca and Medina (in current day Saudi Arabia). Some basic historical context:

Mohammed’s Life and the Spread of Islam. According to Muslims, Mohammed (a direct descendant of Abraham’s son Ishmael) was born in 570 CE into a mostly polytheistic Mecca (though there were also Christians and Jews), where “Allah” was one of many gods that were worshipped. He began reciting the Qur’an when he was 40, and began preaching a few years later. An assassination threat in 622 CE caused Mohammed and his followers to flee to Medina (an event known as the **hijra**), and establish a government in that city. By the time Mohammed died, he had conquered Mecca, and most of the Arabian Peninsula had converted to Islam. Within 150 years, most of the Middle East, North Africa, and northern India were ruled by an Islamic **caliphate** (a government led by the spiritual “descendants of Mohammed”). The first Islamic government in Indonesia appeared in the 1520s. More recently, Islam has spread through Sub-Saharan Africa. While Islam is still strongly associated in the minds of many Americans with the Middle East and North Africa, the majority of the world’s Muslims (>70%) live on the Indian subcontinent, Indonesia, or Sub-Saharan Africa.

Sunnis, Shia, and the Hadith. The split between **Sunnis** (“people of the tradition”) and **Shia** (“party of Ali”) originated in a debate over the leadership of the early caliphate. Shias held that it should pass to Mohammed’s closest male descendant (his son-in-law Ali), while Sunnis thought the decision should be made according to “tradition.” Sunnis won the initial fight for political power, and the Sunni tradition has tended to emphasize decentralized religious authority, and respect for the state. The minority Shia, by contrast, held that their religious leaders (who, at least at first, were directly descended from Ali) were **imams** in a much more substantive sense—they had the power to interpret doctrine, and their commands could directly compete with (or overrule) the state. This split eventually led to substantive theological differences, as Sunnis and Shias recognized different **hadith** (authoritative reports of Mohammed’s life and sayings outside of the Qur’an). The political and theological differences between Sunni and Shia Islam became more pronounced as conflicts arose between the Sunni Turkish-Ottoman Empire (1299-1923), and the various Shia Persian-Iranian empires (1502-1925). Since the end of these empires, political strife has continued (though its relation to religious disagreement is often obscure).

Like the Jewish Torah and Talmud, and the Christian New Testament, the Qur’an and hadith were passed along *orally* at least several decades (and perhaps much longer) before finally being written down. They were finalized somewhere between 700 and 900 CE.

The Golden Age of Islamic Philosophy. Between 700 and 1200, Islamic philosophy, science, and theology advanced much more quickly than did their European, Christian counterparts. Some early **Kalam** philosophy denied that the Qur’an (as a text) had existed eternally, and argued that all important precepts of Islam could be grasped purely by reason. Various Kalam schools argued in favor of free will, atomism, and of the finite nature of time (the universe had a “beginning”). While kalam eventually fell out of favor, the philosophers Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) preserved elements of it, even as they took significant new material from Greek philosophy, and made major contributions to scientific methodology, logic, medicine, political philosophy, and ethics. Much modern Muslim theology can be traced back to these two thinkers. Al-Ghazali, however, very influentially criticized these attempts to understand both God and nature in these ways, which led to a decline in this sort of scholarship.

THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

The pilgrimage to Mecca, known as the Hajj, is a religious obligation that every orthodox Muslim fulfills, if able, at least once in his or her lifetime. The Holy Quran says it, "Pilgrimage to the House [of God built by the prophet Abraham] is a duty men owe to God; those who are able, make the journey." (3:97) Allah said: "And proclaim the pilgrimage among men; they will

come to you on foot and upon each lean camel, they will come from every deep ravine" (22:27). Every one of the thousands at the airport, about to leave for Jeddah, was dressed this way. You could be a king or a peasant and no one would know. Some powerful personages, who were discreetly pointed out to me, had on the same thing I had on. Once thus dressed, we all had begun intermittently calling out "Labbayka! (Allahumma) Labbayka!" (Here I come, O Lord!) Packed in the plane were white, black, brown, red, and yellow people, blue eyes and blond hair, and my kinky red hair -- all together, brothers! All honoring the same God, all in turn giving equal honor to each other. . . (Malcom X, Letter after going on Hajj)

The most basic practices of Islam are the **Five Pillars of Islam**. These are laid out systematically in the Sunni Hadith of Gabriel, but Shi'ites accept similar principles (along with other principles relating specifically to theology and Imams):

1. **Shahadah** (or "act of bearing witness"). A Muslim must publicly profess that "There is no god but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet." Muslims are strict monotheists, like Jews; and hold that Christian Trinitarianism is false.
2. **Salat** ("the prayer"). Muslims should pray five times per day: before dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and during the evening. These prayers involve a ritual washing (or "ablution"), recitations of Qur'an verses in Arabic (see below), and prostrations toward the Grand Mosque in Mecca. There are exceptions for the sick, women who are menstruating or have given birth recently, and others.
 - a. "In the Name of Allah the Merciful, the Compassionate: Praise be to Allah, Creator of the worlds, the Merciful, the Compassionate, Ruler of the day of Judgment. Thee do we worship, and Thee do we ask for aid. Guide us in the straight path, The path of those on whom Thou hast poured forth Thy grace. Not the path of those who have incurred Thy wrath and gone astray" (Sura 1, "The Opening").
3. **Zakat** ("purification.") Muslims should donate 2.5% of their total *wealth* (not just income) to help the poor and maintain religious institutions (including in some cases the political institutions of Muslim-ruled states). This tax is not enforced on the very poor.
 - a. Historically, both the Persian and Ottoman Empire (along with smaller Muslim states) forced non-Muslims to pay the **Jizya**, or tax in replacement of the Zakat. However, because the Jizya was considerably *higher* than the Zakat, this was abandoned during the 20th century as being unfair (though groups such as ISIS have tried to bring it back).
4. **Sawm** ("fast"). During **Ramadan** (the ninth month of the Islamic-lunar calendar), Muslims should abstain from eating, drinking, sex during the day. Again, there are exceptions for those who are physically unable to do this.
5. **Hajj** ("pilgrimage"). At least once during their lives, Muslims should go to Mecca during the last month of the Islamic calendar. As with all of the above, exceptions can be made. This tradition preserves a practice that was common in pre-Islamic Arabia. Malcom X (quoted above) famously went on Hajj, and wrote that the experience of being with so many different sorts of people changed his whole outlook on violence, racial relations, and Islam itself.

OTHER THEMES IN THE QUR'AN

Some other central doctrines outlined in the Qur'an (some of which have come up in recent debates) include the following:

The Qur'an is the Direct, Literal Word of God. While many Jews and Christians hold that their religious texts are the "Word of God," direct quotations of God or Jesus represent only a small portion of their texts' total content. Muslims, by contrast, really do think of the Qur'an as the literal word of God (and hold that Mohammed was in fact illiterate, and thus *could not* have written it himself). This means that Qur'an cannot contain any errors. It also means that it is important for Muslims to read it in the original language (Arabic) as opposed to merely reading translations in their native languages (since these may introduce errors).

The Afterlife. In contrast to both the Jewish Tanakh (which contains almost no references to the afterlife, and none to hell) and the Christian New Testament (in which mentions of heaven/hell are infrequent and vague), the Qur'an contains descriptions of both **Jannah** (a heavenly garden full of both sensual and spiritual fulfillment) and **Jahannam** (a place of torment for sinners, "hell"). Within Islam, one debate has concerned the possibility of people getting *out* of hell (is hell permanent?). There are also long-running debates within both Christianity and Islam concerning the *nature* and *existence* of hell—are the descriptions it simply a metaphors for "being disconnected from God"? Or are they meant to be taken more literally? And what will be fate of "unbelievers" who never got a chance to convert?

"The People of the Book" and Religious Toleration. The Qur'an recognizes the authenticity of the Jewish and Christian holy books, though it holds that they are incomplete (the principles of Judaism being constrained to one small tribe in a particular time and place, and Christians misinterpreting the prophet Jesus's life as grounding their beliefs in the Incarnation, Atonement, and Trinity). Muslims hold that Mohammed is the final **"Seal of the Prophets."** Some passages in the Qur'an suggest that

Jews/Christians should be left to worship as they please, while others suggest punishment/war against unbelievers (see below for an example of each).

- “Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the Last day and does good, they shall have their reward from their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve.” (2:62)
- “Fight those who do not believe in Allah...And the Jews say: Uzair [Ezra?] is the son of Allah; and the Christians say: The Messiah is the son of Allah; these are the words of their mouths; they imitate the saying of those who disbelieved before; may Allah destroy them; how they are turned away!” (9: 29-30)
- While Mohammed tolerated Judaic religious practices while ruling Medina (and had Jewish allies), there is some evidence that he executed up to 700 Jewish prisoners of war from the Banu Qurayza tribe. While this sort of thing was probably common among Jewish, Christian, and polytheistic Arabian leaders of the time, these tactics clearly violate contemporary norms regarding just warfare, and has been a source of long-running source of debate.

WHY ISLAM?

Just as was the case with Judaism and Christianity, we can ask “What allowed Islam to overcome Arabian polytheism so quickly and completely?” and “What explains the continued success of Islam, and its rapid growth in many areas of the world?” Huston Smith (a famous scholar of religion) suggests a few arguments. What do you think of these?

Monotheism. Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam is a theistic religion, which posits that there is only ONE God, and that God *cares* about both humanity in general and their individual life in particular. Many people find this idea attractive, and it may be one reason for this historical “triumph” of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam over the polytheistic religions with which they initially competed.

Surrendering to God. The word *Islam* literally means “surrender,” and the core of Islam (the Five Pillars, Sharia, etc.) tends to focus on *doing* certain things *because* they are commanded. This contrasts with the Jewish emphasis on community and the Christian emphasis on belief. This sort of “total surrender” to an external law can help provide structure to human existence. Unlike Christians, Muslims do not think that humans must be saved from their inherent “sin” by divine intervention; instead, submitting to the will of God is something that humans are “designed” to do, and which they have simply “forgot.” (Again, these contrasts with other religions are rough generalizations, and not absolutes—different individuals/groups within each religion will emphasize different things).

Morality and the Law. In comparison to other religions (especially at the time it was founded), Islam places clear constraints on what rulers (and other powerful people) could do to their subjects: rich people must give to charity, women must consent to marriage, wars must waged justly, etc. In contrast to the (sometimes vague) commandments other religions laid out regarding these matters, the Qur’an and hadith laid these out in concrete detail. Moreover, God is held to punish and reward people who deviate from these guidelines in relatively straightforward ways (in basically the same way that an ideal human judge would reward/punish people). Early Islam played a major role in helping to bring political order to much of the world, which made peoples’ lives better in very concrete ways.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In what ways is the figure of Mohammed similar to Moses in Judaism or Jesus in Christianity? What is different/distinctive about Mohammed?
2. Similar to the question above: How does the Muslim view of the Qur’an compare to the Jewish view of the Torah, or the Christian view of the Gospels? Be sure to examine both similarities and differences.
3. The “Abrahamic” religions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity all share a foundational text (the **Tanakh**, or Hebrew Scriptures), and all hold up figures such as Moses and Abraham as important prophets. In some cases, these shared beliefs have helped them live in peace together (as in ancient Constantinople/Istanbul, and in many current nations). However, in other classes it has led to conflicts (with both Christian- and Muslim-led nations regularly invading each other, and Jewish minorities being treated poorly on many occasions). Why do you think this is?
4. Suppose that you are an observant Sunni Muslim. Write a letter explaining *why* following the Five Pillars is important to you, and what effect following these pillars has on your day-to-day life.
5. Do some research on a famous Muslim philosopher (such as Ibn Sina or Ibn Rushd), and try to explain one or two of their main ideas in a way that a contemporary audience might understand. Be sure to cite your source(s).

THE QU'RAN: ENGLISH-LANGUAGE TRANSLATIONS

- <http://qurango.com/english.html>
- <http://englishquran.com/>
- <http://www.islamwb.com/books/Quran-Saheeh-International-English-Translation.pdf>