
UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION TO ISLAM

Contents

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 An Overview of Islamic Origins
- 1.3 Islam in the World
- 1.4 The Islamic Sects
- 1.5 Prophet Muhammad
- 1.6 The Qur'an
- 1.7 The Articles of Faith in Islam
- 1.8 The Pillars of Faith in Islam
- 1.9 Muslim Festivals
- 1.10 The Ceremonies
- 1.11 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.12 Key Words
- 1.13 Further Readings and References

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit introduces the students to the Islamic world and provides adequate aid to understand Islam in a brief and comprehensive way while highlighting the influence and importance of this religion. It would enable them to understand the context in which Islam was originated, to assess the role of Prophet Muhammad, to comprehend the articles of faith and pillars of faith, and to know about the main Muslim festivals and ceremonies.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Islam is the second largest and most rapid growing religion in the world. It has over 1 billion followers worldwide which is 1/5 of the world population. Islam is the name of the religion and a Muslim is the one who follows this religion. Both the names 'Islam' and 'Muslim' come from the same Arabic root word '*s-l-m*' which means 'peace' and 'submission.' Islam is considered one of the Abrahamic, monotheistic faiths, along with Judaism and Christianity. It teaches that there is only one God who is the origin and creator of the universe. This is the foundation of Islam, and is reflected in the famous sentence which says that, "There is no god but Allah." Islam is universally known as the religion of peace. Islam teaches that one can find peace in one's life only by submitting to Almighty God (Allah) in heart, soul, and deed. Thus the same Arabic root word gives us the universal Muslim greeting '*Salaam alaykum*,' which means 'Peace be with you.'

1.2 AN OVERVIEW OF ISLAMIC ORIGINS

About 610 A.D, the angel Gabriel appeared to a man named Muhammad in the city of Mecca in the present day Saudi Arabia. Gabriel told Muhammad that God had commissioned Muhammad as His last Prophet. The revelations Muhammad received until his death in 632 constitute the Qur'an, Islam's Holy Book. Muhammad's contemporaries in Mecca worshipped many gods and rejected Muhammad's call to worship only one God. In 622, Muhammad and his small band of believers emigrated from the northern part of Mecca to the town of Yathrib, which the Muslims renamed Medina, where he established the first Muslim community. In 630, Muhammad led the army of the growing Muslim community against Mecca, which submitted peacefully. Two years later, by the time of his death, most of Arabia had accepted Islam and become part of the Islamic community. Muhammad was succeeded by a series of rulers called Caliphs under whom Islam burst forth as a new power on the world scene. Gradually, the original unity of Islam was lost. The Caliphate fell before the Mongol onslaught in 1258. Islam continued to spread in the different centuries, but new Muslim kingdoms rose and fell. By the end of the 17th century, the military power of Islam ebbed away and by the end of the 19th and into the first part of the 20th century, most Muslim countries came under the direct or indirect control of European nations. In the second half of the 20th century, Muslim nations gained their independence.

1.3 ISLAM IN THE WORLD

There is a wrong understanding that all Arabs are Muslims and all the Muslims are Arabs. The Arabs are only 20 percent of the world's Muslims. South Asia has 300 million and the Middle East has 200 million Muslims. The two largest Muslim countries in the Middle East are Turkey and Iran which are not Arab countries. All Arabs are not Muslims but over 90 percent of Arabs are Muslims. Muslims are concentrated in a continuous band of countries that extend across North Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and then to Malaysia and Indonesia in Southeast Asia. The percentage of the Muslim population in these countries, except India, ranges from 80 to more than 99 percent. (According to the survey done in 2000)

1.4 THE ISLAMIC SECTS

Islam has two main sects or branches: the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. The term 'Sunni' refers to the traditions followed by Muhammad and early Muslims. Sunnis constitute from 84 to 90 percent of the world's Muslims. After the death of Muhammad, some Muslims believed that his cousin and son-in-law, Ali succeeded him. The term 'Shi'a' refers to the party of Ali, those who believed that religious and political leadership of the Muslim community should always remain in the line of Ali and his wife Fatima. Sufis are another large group of Muslims. Sufism is Islamic mysticism, rather than a sect, like the Sunnis or Shi'ites. So, a Sufi is normally also a Sunni Muslim.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) Islam is a religion of peace. Explain.
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- 2) How will you reconcile with the incorrect notion that all Arabs are Muslims and all the Muslims are Arabs?
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- 3) Briefly explain about the Sunnis and the Shi'ites.
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1.5 PROPHET MUHAMMAD

Prophet Muhammad is considered to be the founder of the Islam religion. He is generally believed to have been born in Arabia on 22nd April 571 A.D. and died on 8th June 632. The meaning of the name Muhammad is 'Peace be on him.' He presented a balanced personality and a noble example of human greatness. At the age of 25 he married Khadija, a 40 year old rich widow of Macca. Though he had the possibilities to acquire wealth and to lead a successful and contented life he showed no importance to them. He set forth himself in search of truth and reality. In the 40th year of his life, one day, when he was sitting in the solitude of a cave, an angel of God appeared to him in human shape and said to him, "Announce in the name of thy Lord, that He hath created – created man from a clot – Announce! And thy Lord is most generous, Who hath afforded knowledge through the pen, Afforded man the knowledge of what he knew not..." God gave him guidance and chose him as His messenger. The revelation of the Lord had been descending upon him for twenty-three long years. These revelations are later compiled as *al-Qur'an* (*Qur'an*), the Holy Scripture of Islam.

Even though Muhammad was specially chosen by God as his Prophet, he was a man just like any other men. Things of joy pleased him and the sad things made him sad. In fact, his humanness never exceeded the limits fixed by God. Later, standing in the shoes of the Prophet, Muhammad became the ruler of Arabia. He was venerated by his people as no other man was ever venerated. The fear of God never left him and he was always a model of humility and meekness. As he started to convey the command of God to His people, he faced strong oppositions from them. But till the end of his life he sternly stood for justice and rectitude. He died due an illness aggravated by poison.

1.6 THE QUR'AN

The Qur'an, the holy text of Islam literally means 'recitation.' Muslims believe that the Qur'an was 'verbally revealed' to Prophet Muhammad, not merely in its meaning and ideas. The original text of the Qur'an is in the Arabic language. The entire text is divided into 114 Suras (chapters) unequal in length. The early Macan Suras are the shortest ones and as time went on, they became longer. The early Suras are seen as voice crying from the very depths of life and impinging forcefully on the prophet's mind in order to make itself explicit at the level of consciousness. This tone gradually gives way to a more fluent and easy style as the legal content increases, for the detailed organization and direction of the nascent community state. It is a debatable issue whether the words of the Qur'an are entirely the words of God or the words of Muhammad. The Muslim authority and believers consider it as purely divine. Prophet Muhammad was only an instrument for God to reveal His message. Though the entire personality of Muhammad is involved in revelation, it would be proper to say that the Divine Word flowed through the Prophet's heart. The Qur'an is primarily a book of religious and moral principles and exhortations, and not a legal document. But it does embody some important legal enunciations issued during the community-state building process at Madina. The ban on consumption of alcohol affords an interesting example of the Qur'anic method of legislation and throws light on the attitude of the Qur'an to the nature and function of legislation itself.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) Who is Prophet Muhammad? Explain.

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- 2) What did the angel of God say to Muhammad when he was sitting in the solitude of the cave?

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- 3) The words of the Qur'an are words of God or words of man. How will you explain this?

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1.7 THE ARTICLES OF FAITH IN ISLAM

The articles of faith are the sum and substance of the Islamic doctrine. The articles of faith are six in number. They are:

Belief in God (*Allah*)

Belief in God (Allah) is expressed in the first part of the *shahada* (profession of faith): *la ilah illa llah* which means, “there is no god except God” (Allah). Allah is the proper name given to God. It seems, however, that the word and the belief in the existence of Allah existed already in pre-islamic Arabia. Muhammad’s father bore the name ‘Abd Allah’ which means ‘God’s slave.’ The prophetic mission of Muhammad was not primarily to proclaim the existence of God but to show His uniqueness and to deny the existence of other minor deities (6:100-102; 6:51/53; 6:57/59). The uniqueness of God can be seen in his proper name Allah. No plural can be formed from the name Allah. Therefore, the title Allah has been called *ism ad-dhat*, ‘the name of the nature.’ All other titles, including the often-used word *rabb*, ‘Lord’, are merely attributes. There are 99 attributes commonly used. The most important of the ‘beautiful names’ in the Qur’an and in Islam are the two titles *ar-rahman ar-rahim*, often translated as ‘The Compassionate, The Merciful’.

Belief in Angels (*Mala’ika*)

The word *mala’ika* is the broken plural of a semitic word *mal’ak* which means ‘Messenger.’ The Qur’an mentions the activity of angels very often, but says nothing about their origin and nature. The Qur’an speaks about the different duties of angels, such as, to praise Allah and to carry his throne (69:39/75), to be His messenger (22:74/75; 35:1), to guard the Holy Qur’an in heaven (80:15/16), to be the guardians of man (13:11/12), to help the believers (3:125/121), to write man’s deeds (82:10-12), to receive sinners and punish them (8:50/52), to guard hell (66:6; 74:31), to pray for the prophets and believers (33:56;33:42/43), and to ask forgiveness for man (4:97/99; 16:28/30). Among the many angels four are archangels. They are *Jibra’il* or *Jibril* (The angel of revelation), *Mika’il* or *Mikal* (The angel who gives sustenance), *Israfil* (The angel who will sound the trumpet on the last day) and *Izra’il* or *Azra’il* (The angel of death). According to Islamic tradition they believe that men are protected by guardian angels: ten by day, ten by night: thus there are 400 of them to guide man from birth till death.

Belief in Prophets (*Rusul*)

For Muslims the prophethood and the veneration of prophets is the heart and foundation of their religion. Through prophets God has mercifully designed to interfere in human history to guide man in all the activities towards the final election. Prophets are not always present in the world; they come from time to time. The period in between the presence of prophets is called *fatra* which means darkness. The Arabic words used to express the prophetic office are *nabi*, *rasul*, and *mursal*. In Persian the three words are invariably translated by the word *paighamar* which means ‘messenger.’ According to Islamic tradition there were 1,24,000 prophets and 315 apostles but the names of only 25 are mentioned in the Qur’an (6:84; 86). Nine of these messengers are given the title of *ulu l-’azam* or ‘Possessors of Constancy.’ They are Noah, Abraham, David, Jacob, Joseph, Job, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Chronologically

Muhammad is the last prophet but qualitatively he is the greatest, because Muslims believe that his message is the culmination of all previous messages.

Belief in Scriptures (*Kutub*)

The word *kitab*, 'Scriptures,' plays a vital role in the Muslim religion from its very beginning. Tradition says that the number of sacred scriptures delivered to man was one hundred and four. Among them ten were given to Adam, fifty to Seth, thirty to Enoch, ten to Abraham, the *Tawrat* (Torah) to Moses, the *Zabur* (Psalms) to David and *Injil* (Gospel) to Jesus. According to Islam, the Qur'an is the final scripture. In fact, nowadays it is usually interpreted that previous scriptures are null and void. This is generally known as theory of abrogation. Different reasons are given to it by different people. Some believe in *tarfi*, 'removal', i.e. the scriptures were taken up again into heaven. Others say that *tahrif*, 'corruption' took place, i.e., the previous texts were tampered with. Again others speak of *tansikh*, 'abrogating,' i.e. the previous scriptures have been superseded and replaced by the Qur'an. Finally, apart from all these, it is asserted that the Qur'an is the epitome of all truths and morals that are taught in the previous books and is the last improvement upon them. Thus the need for any other book is logically eliminated.

Resurrection and the Last day (*Qiyama*)

The day of judgement is one of the principal themes of the Qur'an and it is closely connected with the Resurrection (*Qiyama*) or the Assembly (*al-Ba'th*). On the last day the assembly will take place for the whole of Adam's offspring. The good and evil deeds will be read out. The good deeds will have a bright appearance and the evil deeds will have a gloomy appearance. When the foregoing tests are concluded, a very narrow bridge (*sirat*) has to be crossed. Everybody, both believers and unbelievers, just and unjust, must pass over this bridge (36:66; 37:23-24). Some Muslims will be saved immediately; some will fall headlong into hell and afterwards be released depending on their deeds. The infidels will all fall into hell and remain there forever. Muslims believe in three places in the afterlife. They are Limbo (*a'raf*), Hell (*asman*) and Heaven (*al-janna*). Limbo is the veil between heaven and hell. Etymologically *a'raf* means elevated place. Hell is considered as a place where one has to undergo weeping and wailing for the sins committed. Heaven is almost understood as a garden, a paradise where one gets all the enjoyments.

Belief in the Divine Decree (*al-Qadar*)

This article of faith is a post-Qur'anic addition. The Muslims believe that Allah is the Supreme Judge who can exercise any influence on the performance of an action. Although Allah gives just retribution for human actions, nothing can make any restrictions upon the pre-temporal plans of his decrees. It brings a contradiction: how man is responsible for his action and how man can use his freedom; but the Islamic scholars argue that in actual fact, it is not a question of contradiction but of deliberate contrast. The question is approached from different angles. At one time man's responsibility is stressed and at another Allah's divine omnipotence. The texts are complementary rather than contradictory. They aim at the inculcation of man's responsibility and Allah's sovereignty into the believer's minds.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) List the articles of faith in Islam?

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2) According to the Qur'an, what are some of the main duties of the angels?

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3) Muslims believe in three places in the afterlife. Briefly explain them.

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1.8 THE PILLARS OF FAITH IN ISLAM

Like any other religion Islam demands of its believer faith (*iman*). The practices prescribed are often called *arkan ud-din* or 'The Pillars of Faith'. The five 'Pillars of Faith' are as follows.

Profession of Faith (*Tashahhud*)

The word *shahada* means 'testimony,' the statement of an eyewitness. In the religious sense it denotes the Muslim profession of faith. The act itself is called *tashahhud*, 'giving one's testimony.' The person who performs the act is called *shahid* which now means both 'witness' and 'martyr.' The normal formula of confession is the *Kalmia*, 'Word' and consists of two sentences: "*la ilaha illa llah: Muhammadur rasulu llah*" which means "there is no God but Allah: Muhammad is Allah's messenger." The *kalmia* is pronounced on occasions such as birth, death, and at the time of ritual prayer. Besides, it is constantly on the lips of Muslims as a kind of ejaculatory prayer. To the Muslims, the mere recitation is an act of piety. Orthodox theologians give six conditions as to the manner of recitation of the *kalmia*. They are: (1) It must be repeated aloud; (2) It must be perfectly understood; (3) It must be believed in the heart; (4) It must be professed till death; (5) It must be recited correctly and (6) It must be professed and declared without hesitation.

Prayer (*Salat*)

The word *salat* is the technical term for ritual prayer. The word *salat* is probably derived from the Aramaic *selota* which means 'to bow, to bend.' Muslim scholars say that *salat* is derived from *sala* which mean 'to burn.' Hence *salat* represents the practice of prayer. All the Muslims, adult, sane and healthy, are obliged to pray five times in a day. The place recommended for prayer is the mosque

but it can be said anywhere, provided the place is clean and fitting to separate oneself from the world. The position must be the *gibla* which is the direction of Mecca. Besides this, the person must observe legal purity. For all purifications water is used, judged by its colour and smell. Women say their prayers at home normally but some mosques have special enclosures for them. On Fridays the midday prayer is said with special solemnity. The leader of the prayer is known as *Imam*. There are other special prayers performed on certain occasions (e.g. Ramadan) and for special purposes (for guidance, success, rain, etc.). Another prayer which is recommended is the night vigil conducted during Ramadan and during the nights before the great feasts.

Fasting (*Sawm*)

The word *sawm* and *siyam* are derived from the root *s-w-m*. Originally the word meant 'to be at rest' but now it is simply used for 'fasting.' For a Muslim, fasting means abstaining from food, drink, and sexual intercourse. The Qur'an speaks precisely about fasting (2:83-187/179-183) but there are also many *hadiths* (traditions) about it. Fasting is obligatory for all Muslims who are adult with sound mind and body. Exceptions are given to those who are sick, travelling, and for the women who have menstruation and who are pregnant or have suckling children. But they have to make up for the number of missed fasts at another time. Fasting must be preceded by expressing the intention. For Muslims, Ramadan is a special month of fasting (2:183-187/179-183) as a preparation for 'The Night of Power.' The results of fasting are manifold. It brings blessings to the individual and to the community. Fasting strengthens the idea of God's sovereignty and man's dependence upon Him. It stimulates sympathy and solidarity with the poor, with the feeling of hunger. All the more, a feeling of unity and solidarity is fostered among the members of the community.

The Religious Tax (*Zakat*)

The word *zakat* has no satisfactory Arabic etymology. It is probably derived from the Aramaic *zakut* which refers to the 'purification at the increase of one's possessions.' In the religious sense *zakat* is that part of a Muslim's earnings which is payable as tax in the name of God, and is to be given to certain persons according to the rules of the Shari'a. It is prescribed by the Qur'an as a form of piety for all believers (9:5; 9:11). It is a tax on savings and not on income as it is in other systems. The taxable properties are mainly animals (camels, cattle, sheep, and goats), grains and fruits (wheat, barley, dates, and dry grapes), metals (gold and silver), and merchandise. The beneficiaries of the tax are the poor who own less than the prescribed minimum for giving *zakat*, the destitute, people who collect the *zakat*, Muslims who are in debt, travellers whose resources are exhausted, those who are serving for the cause of Islam, slaves, and those who perform the acts of benevolence.

Pilgrimage (*Hajj*)

It is an obligation for every Muslim to undertake the pilgrimage once in his lifetime; but there are conditions. A woman may perform the pilgrimage only with her husband's permission, accompanied by her husband or a companion. A Muslim may also delegate another believer for the performance of the pilgrimage. If a believer dies without having gone on the pilgrimage, it must be undertaken by a substitute. The pilgrimage consists of travelling to Mecca, Medina, Mina, the Plain of Arafat, and Muzdalifah. The total travel time is

generally five days. Newcomers to Mecca stop at Miquat to wash, pray, and put on an *Ihram*, which is two pieces of white cloth that are draped around the body. The pilgrimage is important both for the individual Muslim and for the whole Muslim community. For the majority of Muslims it is a wonderful experience to visit the sanctuary at Mecca, to sense the union of thousands of believers from different races and culture. The pilgrim receives a new dignity and status in the community. For Islam as a community and world religion, the pilgrimage is a source of unity and solidarity.

Check Your Progress IV

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) What are the six conditions that must be fulfilled before recitation of the *kalmia*?

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- 2) What are the benefits of fasting (*Sawm*) according to Islam?

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- 3) Who are the people exempted from the religious tax (*Zakat*)?

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1.9 MUSLIM FESTIVALS

As for any other religion, Islam too has many festivals with deeper meanings and messages. In fixing the dates of these feasts they follow the Muslim Calendar Year, which begins with Hijra, 15th or 16th of July. Since the Muslim calendar follows the lunar year, the month and consequently the festival dates keep changing. Islam has two major religious festivals. They are *Id-al-Fitr*, and *Id al-Adha*. *Id al-Fitr*, more commonly called *Id*, is celebrated at the end of the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. *Id al-Adha* is celebrated at the end of the Hajj, the religious pilgrimage. Some of the other Islamic festivals are *Lailatul Qadr* (The Night of Power), *Milad-an-Nabi* (Birthday of the Prophet), *Lailatul Bara'at* (Night of Deliverance), *Lailatul Mi'raj* (The Night of the Ascent), and *Muharram* (New Year's Day).

1.10 THE CEREMONIES

Islam is characterized by a number of ceremonies and practices which are common to the whole world of Islam. The main ceremonies are connected with birth and infancy, marriage, and death. The first duty to be performed on the

birth of a child is to say the *adhan* or call to prayer in the infant's right ear. This is to make the child at once familiar with the Muslim profession of faith and to preserve him/her from the influence of the evil spirits. It is a recommendable custom for Muslims to give the child a name on the seventh day, but this may be done earlier or later too. A very common practice among the Muslims is circumcision. Many consider it as the initiation ceremony to Islam. Though marriage (*Nikah*) is not a religious ceremony, and only a civil contract, it is a great event. Marriage is prescribed for every Muslim, and celibacy is almost universally condemned. *Nikah* is preceded and followed by feasts and celebrations which vary from place to place. The washing of the corpse is the first ceremony after the death of a person. The ritual prayers are said for the dead person and the body placed in front of the rows of praying people. The funeral service begins with prayers which are said in the mosque or in an open space near the house of the deceased. The male relatives and friends walk behind the bier. Carrying the bier is considered a very meritorious act. On the third day after the burial it is usual for the relatives to visit the grave and to recite certain passages from the Qur'an. On the seventh and fortieth day a meal is served to relatives and friends.

Check Your Progress V

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What are the two major religious festivals of the Muslims?

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2) Islam is characterized by a number of ceremonies. What are they connected with?

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1.11 LET US SUM UP

Let us conclude this section with the point that 'Islam is a religion of peace.' Islam seeks to promote peace at two levels: peace with oneself and peace with others. The former is achieved by creating harmony and balance between the emotions and the spiritual self of the person. In other words it is a balance between one's emotions and conscience. The latter is achieved by training and urging the followers to fulfill the rights to each other. It should be specially noted in this context that in Islam, salvation is not possible by just fulfilling the obligations to God; one has to also fulfill the obligations to other human beings. All the doctrines, teachings, practices, and customs are meant to lead the followers to one single aim, which is peace. For a Muslim, the invitation to spread peace is not restricted to his or her own religion but goes beyond the walls of religion and class, which in turn would give a universal garment to this religion.

1.12 KEY WORDS

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| Allah | : The proper name given to God in Islam |
| Hadiths | : The Islamic traditions |
| Hajj | : Pilgrimage |
| Kalima | : It literally means 'Word.' It is the normal formula of confession of Islam. It consists of two sentences: " <i>la ilaha illa llah: Muhammadur rasulu llah</i> " |
| Kutub | : Scripture |
| Mala'ika | : Angel |
| Nikah | : Marriage |
| Ramadan | : It is the ninth month of the Islamic year. It is the holy month of fasting commanded by the Qur'an for all adult Muslims. |
| Rusul | : Prophet |
| Salat | : Prayer |
| Sawm | : Fasting |
| Shahada | : Testimony |
| Suras | : The chapters of Qur'an |
| Zakat | : The Religious Tax |

1.13 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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