



## 2 Basic Beliefs

**T**here are many similarities between the beliefs of Islam and those of Judaism and Christianity. The three religions spring from the same faith tradition, and Muhammad's role in conveying the word of God is similar to that of Moses and Jesus. His aim was not to found a new religion, but to correct and complete the message of his predecessors.

### **Principles and Tenets**

Six principles define the beliefs of Islam. They relate to the supremacy of God, Muhammad as the messenger of God, the Quran as the word of God, the immortal existence of the angels (and the devil as a fallen angel), sin and the final judgment.

The fundamental belief of Islam is the absolute oneness of God. This is proclaimed again and again in the Quran, most clearly in the verse:

Say: He is Allah,  
The One and Only;  
Allah, the Eternal, Absolute;  
He begetteth not,

Nor is He begotten;  
And there is none  
Like unto Him. (Sura 112:1–4)

The corollary of this is that any association of another being with God is the unforgivable sin of *shirk* (association or polytheism), thus ruling out any veneration of minor gods, idols, human saints, or a divine consort or son. Even Muhammad, though the greatest of prophets, is merely a man, not to be worshipped or called upon to intercede between man and God.

Next to this uncompromising monotheism, the most important doctrine in Islam is that God has revealed his divine will through the Prophet Muhammad and that the Quran, Islam's holy book, is the completion of this revelation. God is transcendent—that is, prior to and apart from the created universe—and beyond all comparison. But he is a personal God, “as near as the vein on one’s neck,” and can therefore be approached directly without an intermediary such as a priest or a saint. God’s power and knowledge are infinite. He is merciful and compassionate and hates oppression and injustice. He requires from mankind submission, truthfulness and trust. On the Day of Judgment, every person’s sins and good deeds will be weighed in a balance, and God will send whom he wills to a paradise of delights or a hell of torment.

**Heaven and Hell.** Islam believes strongly in an afterlife in which human beings are rewarded or punished according to their conduct on earth. Judgment, however, is postponed until the Last Day. In the meantime, the soul remains in the grave, where it receives a foretaste of its fate.

The Quran contains two versions of Paradise. One is a garden flowing with rivers of sweet water, milk, wine and honey and planted with fruit and shade trees. In later verses, the Quran presents a more austere version of Paradise. That is, a pyramid or cone of eight levels, its top shaded by a lotus tree, its walls guarded by angels. The elect are lodged in rising order according to their merit. The prototypes of the Quran and the Ka`ba are kept in Paradise, and so are the records of men's deeds to be weighed on Judgment Day, and the standard of the Prophet. Paradise is located above the visible heavens and rests on a number of seas. Above it is the throne of God.

The two versions of Paradise are not necessarily contradictory, although the tone of each is different. The later version obviously inspired Dante's description in *The Divine Comedy*. The eleventh-century Muslim theologian al-Ghazali believed that the pleasures of Paradise were more imaginary than sensual and included the joys of the intellect. He thought that the greatest reward of the elect was the presence of God.

Hell in the Quran is generally conceived of as a place called *jahannam* (related to the Hebrew *gehenna*). Sometimes it seems to be a person, as when God says, "Bring Hell" on the Last Day and "Hell shall burst with fury." Hell is a reverse image of Paradise, a crater of seven concentric rings or terraces, one less than in Paradise, as fewer souls will be consigned to Hell. Each ring has a gate, and punishments are graded downward according to the severity of the sin. A bridge as narrow as the edge of a sword spans the mouth of Hell; the souls of the righteous will cross it with

more or less ease, while those of the wicked will fall into the crater. Al-Ghazali says that the bridge is simply the life of man on earth.

**Angels, Jinns and Devils.** The Quran speaks of three classes of creatures other than mankind—angels, jinns and devils. Angels (*mala'ika*) are the messengers and slaves of God. They were formed of light, but appear in various guises and are commanded by four archangels: Jibril (Gabriel), Mikail, Izrail and Israfil.

A belief in jinns was common in pre-Islamic Arabia, where they probably represented the old animistic gods. The Quran retained them as a separate creation, and Muhammad preached to them as well as to men and women. Jinns are created of fire; they are intelligent, physically strong, usually imperceptible yet capable of appearing in various forms. In folklore they are connected with magic and talismans and can be made to serve men. Some Muslim philosophers, however, doubted their existence. Ibn Khaldoun, one of the greatest of Muslim thinkers, said the truth about them was known only to God.

Devils in Islam are associated with jinns, although they are a different class of beings. The Quran speaks of *shaitan* (Satan) in the singular and also in the plural (*shayateen*). Devils do not reside in Hell but will be sent there at the end of time. One of their weapons against mankind is disease, especially the plague. In religious thought, shaitan is the power in man's heart that is opposed to God.

## **The Holy Quran**

Muslims believe that the Quran is a transcript of parts of a book that is preserved in Heaven and in which is recorded all that has ever happened and all that ever will happen.

This is the Book;  
In it is guidance sure, without doubt,  
To those who fear Allah. (Sura 2:2)

The Quran is literally the word of God. It contains the will of God as revealed in the Arabic language for all Muslims. The Jewish Torah and the Christian Gospel also contain the will of God as revealed to those peoples; Muslims believe that the Quran completes the revelation and restores it to the pristine truth. It is infallible and immutable.

The text of the Quran was transmitted to Muhammad piecemeal over a period of twenty-two years by a Holy Spirit, traditionally identified as the angel Gabriel. Muhammad was in a state of spiritual communion when the messages that comprise the Quran were revealed to him. His remarks, observations and actions—made in a normal state and second in importance to the Quran—are recorded in the Hadith, the traditions of the Prophet. He delivered the Quranic revelations orally to his followers who committed them to memory. On his instructions, some of the messages were recorded during his lifetime, often in a haphazard manner on palm leaves, flat stones, the shoulder blades of camels, or scraps of parchment. The Quran was finally compiled in its present form in 651, nineteen years after the Prophet's death.

**Form.** The Quran is divided into 114 chapters (*sura*), and the chapters divided into verses (*aya*), numbering 6,236 in all. The chapters vary in length from 3 to 282 ayas. Scholars can distinguish between the revelations received at Mecca and those received at Medina, which are known as the “earlier” and “later” suras, respectively. The Meccan suras tend to be short and deal with religious themes, while the Medinan suras are usually longer and deal with specific legal, social or political situations and can be understood only with knowledge of the circumstances in which they were revealed.

Muslims believe that Quran’s meaning is inseparable from the language in which it was revealed. Translations into other languages are considered interpretations; the true Quran is in Arabic. Therefore Muslims everywhere, whatever their native tongue, recite the Quran only in its Arabic original.

All students of Arabic, whether Muslim or not, agree that the Quran is incomparable. It is extraordinarily concise yet rich in its imagery, with a rhythm and cadence of peculiar beauty. Many of the suras are written in plain prose, but the majority are in rhymed verse. The syntax is often complex, even to educated Arabs, and some of the vocabulary appears nowhere else in Arabic literature.

**Content.** An unbiased reading of the Quran reveals it to be one of the great religious books of the world. It sets forth the theological and moral basis of a faith that has satisfied the religious aspirations and exalted the spirits of a large part of mankind for the past fourteen centuries. It is a rich storehouse of legends, stories common to the Bible, moral

maxims, ecstatic verse and legal precepts. It reveals a noble concept of deity and of man's moral obligations. It treats eternal themes in an original and powerful manner.

Even in translation, the devotional poetry is of a very high order:

God is the Light  
Of the heavens and the earth.  
The parable of His Light  
Is as if there were a Niche  
And within it a Lamp:  
The Lamp enclosed in Glass;  
The glass as it were  
A brilliant star:  
Lit from a blessed Tree,  
An Olive, neither of the East  
Nor of the West,  
Whose Oil is well-nigh luminous  
Though fire scarce touched it:  
Light upon Light!  
Allah doth guide whom He will  
To His light.... (Sura 24:35)

Muslims venerate the Quran with an intensity hardly known to Jews or Christians. Some learn the entire book by heart; all can recite large parts of it. It provides quotations for every occasion, both public and private, and consolation in all circumstances. Some people never leave home without a copy. It must be treated with great respect: no other book is allowed to be placed over it; it should be carried above the waist; one must not smoke or drink while reading it or

listening to it. It is a talisman against disease or disaster. Quranic inscriptions are chiseled in stone, painted on tiles or woven in cloth for public and private use. Copies of the Quran have been illuminated and embellished to create great works of Islamic art. Because of its association with the Quran, Arabic calligraphy developed into one of the fine arts.

As Muhammad often said to his detractors, the Quran itself was his only miracle and proved him to be among the prophets.

### **Sunna: The Traditions of the Prophet**

In addition to the Quran—the holy word of God—Islam is based on the traditions of the Prophet: that is, the sayings and actions of Muhammad as recalled and transmitted by his contemporaries. These traditions, known collectively as the *sunna* of the Prophet, are of almost equal weight as the revelations of divine will given in the Quran, and in many cases they interpret and define the often-cryptic passages in the Holy Book. Sunna is also the name of the major branch of Islam, whose followers are called Sunnites (or Sunni), and who comprise 85 to 90 percent of the Muslim people.

**The Hadith.** In the years immediately following the death of Muhammad, the Muslims had only to turn to those closest to him in life—his widow Aisha was a rich source—to determine what the Prophet did or said on a particular occasion or what his reply was to a question concerning the right or wrong way of thinking or acting. As time went on and Muhammad's contemporaries died off, it became

necessary to collect the traditions and to record them for the use of judges and others in authority, as well as for ordinary people. The record of an individual tradition was called a *hadith*, meaning “communication” or “narrative.” Each hadith had to be supported by a chain of authorities going back to Muhammad. Thus a hadith consisted of two parts: the chain of authorities (A said that B said that C said...that the Prophet told him or did this or that on such and such an occasion), followed by the substance of the hadith.

As the Muslims conquered new territories and began to split into factions, an enormous number of hadiths came into circulation, many of them contradictory and plainly not in accordance with relevant passages in the Quran. Hadiths were introduced supporting rival claimants to the caliphate, or authorizing practices and beliefs native to the new territories and congenial to new converts. Shi`ite Islam, for example, accepted only hadiths stemming from its founder Ali and his partisans. By the tenth century, the Abbasid caliphs, who then ruled the Muslim world, ordered a critical examination and reform of tradition, which reduced the number of hadiths in circulation from some 600,000 to about 3,000. The method of elimination was to establish the authenticity of the chain of authorities and also to examine the credibility of the substance of each hadith. This led to the writing of the first biographies of the leaders of early Islam, with an eye to their degree of intimacy with the Prophet and of the likelihood of their familiarity to others in the chain of authority. By this method, hadiths were divided into three categories: the genuine, the good

and the weak. A certain amount of inconsistency remained and is tolerated by the most orthodox Muslims. Between Sunni and Shi`ites, however, there is wide disagreement over which hadiths are acceptable.

Many of the hadiths deal with abstruse points of Islamic law (*shari`a*) or with religious dogma and the minutiae of religious practice. The rituals of prayer and of pilgrimage, for example, are almost entirely based on tradition. Some hadiths allude to particular events and situations during the career of the Prophet that must be known before they can be interpreted. Some reinforce statements already made clear and complete in the Quran, while others extend or modify Quranic injunctions. "Wine is the key of all evils," is a hadith reinforcing the Quranic ban on intoxicating drink. Although the Quran specifically permits divorce, one hadith sheds an entirely different light on the matter by stating, "of lawful things the most hateful to God is divorce." There are hadiths prohibiting suicide and condemning murderers to eternal damnation. Others show the importance that Muhammad attached to matters of personal hygiene, as well as proper table manners. Many hadiths deal with women. "The true veil is in the eyes of men" poses a nice question as to where modesty and immodesty lie. "Of worldly things, women and perfume are made dear to me and the comfort of my eyes is made in prayer" gives an intimate glimpse into the private life of Muhammad. It seems that no subject is too large or too small to be covered by a hadith.

## The Five Pillars of Islam

Among the specific duties set forth in the Quran and spelled out in the Hadith are the Five Pillars of Islam. These are five specific actions that a Muslim must perform in order to be on the right path. They are: testimony to faith, prayer, almsgiving, fasting and the pilgrimage.

**The First Pillar: testimony (*shahada*).** This is the profession of faith: “There is but one God; Muhammad is the messenger of God.” The statement contains the essence of Islam: the unity and uniqueness of God and the role of Muhammad in bringing the message of God to mankind. In its melodious Arabic form, “*la ilaha illa allah; muhammad rasul allah*,” it is repeated every day by all devout Muslims throughout the world and is heard in the *muezzin’s* call of the faithful to prayer. It is also seen in inscriptions on buildings and on the coins and flags of some Muslim states.

**The Second Pillar: prayer (*salah*).** This is not simply by personal choice in time or manner but in the form of ritualized worship. The Quran promises that those who pray and perform good deeds will enter Paradise, and tradition states that each prayer absolves one of minor sins. The Quran calls on all Muslims to pray regularly and at frequent intervals; the form and timing of prayer have been fixed by tradition. Every adult Muslim of sound mind and body, male or female, is required to pray five times a day—at sunset (the beginning of the Muslim day), in the evening, at dawn, at noon and in the mid-afternoon. The

hours are announced by the call of the muezzin from the mosque (now often transmitted by radio or television). Prayer may be performed in private, but it is better to do it in the company of others and preferably in a mosque. The midday prayer on Friday, which is the Muslim sabbath, is communal, and every able-bodied man is expected to go to the mosque. When praying communally, the worshippers form in lines behind a chosen leader, called an *imam*, and face in the direction of the Ka`ba in Mecca. The worshipper must be in a state of ritual purity, accomplished by washing the face and the hands and arms up to the elbow, rubbing water on the head, and washing or rubbing the feet. A fountain is provided for this purpose in the mosque, but if no water is available, clean sand may be used instead. The worshipper removes his shoes or sandals and stands on a special rug or mat to maintain cleanliness. Women, for reasons of modesty, do not usually pray in public. If they must do so (when traveling, for instance), they stand behind the men in a separate row.

Above all, prayer should be performed devoutly, with solemnity and decorum, but without undue emotion or false humility. A Muslim at prayer should not be interrupted, stared at, photographed or passed in front of. Prayer must be performed in Arabic, whatever the language of the worshipper. The ritual of prayer follows a set form throughout the world, though variations in length and Quranic texts are permitted. The worshipper bows several times while repeating devotional phrases, such as *allahu akbar* (God is most great) and recites the opening verse of the Quran:

Praise be to Allah  
The Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds;  
Most Gracious, Most Merciful;  
Master of the Day of Judgment,  
Thee do we worship,  
And Thine aid we seek. (Sura 1:2–5)

He may recite other verses, and he kneels and prostrates himself with hands and forehead on the ground. At the end, he rises and pronounces the testimony of faith and, looking around him, says to his companions, “Peace be upon you and the mercy of God.”

Besides the five daily prayers, Muslims perform other prayers for special occasions. Special prayers are held on the great feast days of Islam. Prayers are also said for the dead, to induce rain during drought or to avert a calamity that threatens the community.

As with other major religions, prayer in Islam is both an act of personal devotion and a communal rite reinforcing the unity of the faithful.

**The Third Pillar: payment of the alms tax (*zakah*).** Charity is one of the principal duties imposed by the Quran, and benevolence towards the less fortunate is highly praised. In theory, almsgiving is divided into the obligatory (*zakah*) and the voluntary (*sadaqa*), but the distinction is not always maintained. The *zakah* prescribes a system of fixed taxes in money or kind on the possessions of Muslims. In early times, *zakah* was collected by the state, and this is still the case in traditional Muslim states, where it takes the place of

income tax. Elsewhere, Muslims voluntarily make the collection among themselves and dispense it for the welfare of the community, primarily to help the poor. In addition, Muslims are by tradition openhanded to street beggars. On feast days they give generously to the poor and bestow alms to atone for any involuntary breaking of a fast.

**The Fourth Pillar: fasting (*sawm*).** Once a year for a period of one month, Muslims are required to abstain from food, drink, smoking and sexual relations during the hours of daylight. This occurs during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, when Muhammad received the first revelation. As the Islamic year is lunar and thus ten to eleven days shorter than the solar year, the months move gradually through the seasons. The fast is difficult enough during the short cool days of winter; in summer it can be a severe hardship.

The fast is meant to test the self-denial and submission of the faithful and permit the rich to experience the deprivations of the poor. Both men and women and all but the youngest children keep the fast. The sick, pregnant women, and those on long journeys may delay fasting until a more convenient time or, if unable to fast, pay alms for each day the fast is broken. In some Muslim countries, the day-long fast is enforced by law. All restaurants close, market hours are restricted, and smoking in public is prohibited. Non-Muslims are expected to refrain from any provocative display of their exemption from the fast. Muslims are urged to give generously to charity during Ramadan. The *zakah al-fitr* donation is a day's supply of food from each family member.

Paradoxically, Ramadan can be one of the merriest seasons of the Muslim year in some countries. In the evening, special foods are served to break the fast, and families and friends feast into the night. Many people take to the streets for communal festivities. The mosques are brightly lit and filled with worshippers. Parts of the towns are turned into fairgrounds; shops, cafes and places of amusement are open; children, allowed to stay up late, ride on swings and merry-go-rounds. Most people get little sleep, as an hour or so before dawn, men march through the streets beating drums to awaken everyone for a final meal before the day's fasting begins. As the month draws to a close, everyone scans the sky for the appearance of the new moon marking the end of the fast. News of the sighting is traditionally conveyed by the booming of a cannon (now, usually by radio and television). This is the signal for the start of *eid al-fitr*, literally the Feast of Breaking the Fast, which lasts for three days or more. Children receive presents, new clothes are worn, and alms are given to the poor.

**The Fifth Pillar: pilgrimage (*hajj*).** The Quran requires that every adult Muslim of sound body and mind make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime if possible. Exemptions are permitted for the sick, the insane, and women who have no husbands or other male relatives to accompany them.

Pilgrimage is of two kinds. *Umrah*, the lesser pilgrimage, may be made at any time of the year and is voluntary. *Hajj*, the required pilgrimage, must be made during the twelfth Islamic month, *dhu al-hijjah*. Despite the difficulties and expense of traveling from distant places to Mecca, most

Muslims perform the Hajj with enthusiasm, not only for its religious meaning, but as an opportunity to travel, to see the historical sites of Islam and to mingle with Muslims from other parts of the world. All who makes the pilgrimage are entitled to be called *hajji* and are held in great respect.

Muslims believe that the rites of the pilgrimage were taught to Adam by the archangel Gabriel and that Abraham (Ibrahim), the ancestor of both the Jews and the Arabs, also performed them. With time, however, the shrine in Mecca and the ceremonies themselves became polluted by polytheism, and it was Muhammad's mission to restore the people to the worship of the one true God (*allah* in Arabic). Although the Quran does not describe the rituals of the prayer, the rites performed today are based on the tradition of those performed by Muhammad during his last pilgrimage.

The pilgrim must enter the holy territory that surrounds Mecca in a state of ritual purity. Having bathed and trimmed his hair, beard and nails, the male pilgrim dons the *ihram*—two sheets of seamless white cloth, one wrapped around the hips, the other draped over the shoulders. He must not cover his head or feet, though he may wear sandals and carry a sunshade. Women wear a simple white robe and a veil that covers the head but not the face. This uniformity of dress is meant to remove all distinctions of class, wealth and origin among the pilgrims. Throughout the Hajj, pilgrims may not cut their hair, trim their nails, wear jewelry or perfume, or indulge in sexual intercourse. Each group of pilgrims is led through the rites of worship by a guide who speaks the language of the group.

The destination of every pilgrim is the Holy Mosque in Mecca that contains the Ka`ba. The Ka`ba is a nearly cubical structure of dark stone about fifty feet high, which Muslims believe was built by Abraham and his son Ismail. It stands in a large courtyard containing several smaller structures and a colonnade. The pilgrim circles the Ka`ba seven times (the *tawaf*), trying at least once to touch or to kiss the sacred Black Stone, which is embedded in a corner of the building. Believed to have been sent down from Heaven by God in ancient times, the Black Stone is about twelve inches across, black with a reddish hue and surrounded by a silver collar. Over the centuries, the touch of countless pilgrims has worn it smooth. After kissing or touching the Black Stone, the pilgrim then runs several times between two hills near the Ka`ba and drinks from the holy well of Zamzam. These actions are said to commemorate Hagar's search for water in the desert for herself and her son Ismail. The pilgrims pray and recite passages from the Quran during these rites and may hear a sermon preached by the imam of the mosque. The rites described so far are part of the Umrah as well as of the Hajj proper.

On the eighth day of the month of the Hajj, the pilgrims pour out of Mecca through a mountain pass onto the Plain of Arafat. They spend the night at a place called Mina in prayer and meditation and in visiting with each other. On the second day, they proceed to the Hill of Arafat where the *wukuf*, or Standing, takes place. Here they stay from noon to sunset in supplication and perhaps hear a commemoration of Muhammad's farewell sermon calling for peace and harmony

among all believers. After sunset the pilgrims move to another site on the plain called Muzdalifa, where they gather pebbles to stone the devil the next day and where they also spend the night as before. On the third day they return to Mina, where they throw their pebbles at a pillar representing the devil.

On the fourth day, the Feast of the Sacrifice (*eid al-adha*) begins, when each head of household is expected to sacrifice an animal in memory of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Ismail at God's command. Muslims throughout the world make a similar sacrifice on this day. The meat is cooked, part of it is eaten and the rest is given to the poor. At this point, pilgrims may discard the ihram for ordinary clothing, clip their nails and shave (women cut off a symbolic lock). They are now free to return to Mecca, where they usually make another ritual circling of the Ka`ba.

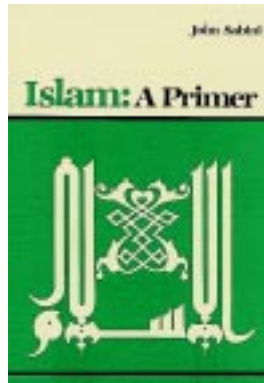
Most pilgrims visit Medina on their way to or from Mecca, although this is not part of the pilgrimage. There they pay their respects at Muhammad's tomb and visit the tombs of other members of his family and of his companions.

Until a few years ago, most pilgrims traveled to Mecca by ship across the Red Sea, or by land in huge caravans wending their way across the deserts surrounding the Holy City. These caravans assembled months ahead at such points as Damascus, Cairo and Baghdad and gathered together pilgrims from Turkey and eastern Europe, North Africa and Sudan, Iran, Samarkand and India. The caravans were like moving cities, the pilgrims traveling by horse,

camel, litter or on foot, combining all levels of society and many nationalities and races. The rulers of Muslim countries organized the caravans, appointed leaders and troops for their protection, supplied money and foodstuffs, and built roads and water cisterns along the way. The entire voyage might take six months or a year, and many pilgrims died of hardship or disease.

And proclaim the Pilgrimage  
Among men; they will come  
To thee on foot and (mounted)  
On every kind of camel,  
Lean on account of journeys  
Through deep and distant  
Mountain highways.... (Sura 22:27)

Today the great majority of pilgrims come by air to Jiddah and travel the short distance to Mecca by road. The Saudi Arabian government has created a huge infrastructure for the pilgrimage, including a giant airport, reception centers, local transport, accommodations, water and food supplies and health facilities. In the mid-nineteenth century, the number of pilgrims in one year was estimated to be about 50,000. Today, approximately two million people make the Hajj each year. The pilgrims come from every continent and nearly every country in the world, their travel facilitated by the recently recovered independence of many Muslim states, by greater wealth and by improved transport. The Hajj remains one of the most striking manifestations of religious faith and unity in the world today.



“Basic Beliefs” is the second chapter of *Islam: A Primer* by John Sabini (6th edition, 2001), published by AMIDEAST. This is an excellent introduction for those with no previous knowledge of the religion. It provides straightforward descriptions of Islam’s basic beliefs and practices, in addition to short chapters on Islamic law, the Prophet Muhammad and Islam’s origins, Islamic sects, the spread of Islam, and the achievements of

Islamic civilization at its height. Islam’s common heritage with Judaism and Christianity and the historical relationships between Muslims, Jews, and Christians are also addressed.

*Established in 1951, AMIDEAST is a private, nonprofit organization that seeks to improve understanding and cooperation between the peoples of the Middle East/North Africa and the United States. Programs and services include the production and distribution of educational materials, educational exchange between the Middle East and the United States, and development assistance in the region. Headquartered in Washington, DC, AMIDEAST maintains offices in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, West Bank/Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.*

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